

Sermon 15 February 2009; Rev Nathalie Dürmüller

Subject: Sanctification, Bible texts: Exodus 20, 1-4; Ephesians 6, 1-9

Dear Parishioners and friends of the Swiss Church

A few minutes ago we had the pleasure of attending the baptism of Lia Lin Karlaganis. Isn't it awesome to see such a small creature, wonderfully made by God? It reminds me that life is a very precious gift and that the life of every single one of us began once like this. The life of a new born seems to be like a white page – everything is open and everything seems to be possible. Lia is already one year old, so she has already experienced quite a few things. She mainly learns from the example of her parents and from how they live with her. Of course in her early years her parents are going to influence her most. For parents this responsibility can generate new questions. They start asking themselves: “What do I want to teach to my child?” “What from my own family background do I want to pass on to the next generation and what do I not want to pass on?” One of the decisions that they have to make is whether they want to raise their child in the Christian faith or not. I am glad that today we are living in a society where this choice can be taken freely – so often the baptism also means something to the parents. Thinking about religious education also involves reflecting on the values that the parents want to transmit to their child. It is not always easy in our society, where everything seems to be possible and everything is accepted in one way or another to decide on the values that we want to stick to. I think that it is highly challenging for parents and for all of us to decide in which values we believe in. In the postmodern society, that we are living in, the variety of ways of living is infinite. This is something that has certainly changed over the last century. But was it in fact easier to find one's own values and to stick to them in former times? The Bible gives us some ideas of how people dealt with that issue a long time ago.

The passage that we heard from the New Testament talks about children's education. In Ephesians 6 it says: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” And: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the

Lord.” So, do you think that the bachelor Paul would have given advice on children’s education if it was an easy thing at the time? Of course not! People were already struggling with the question about the right kind of education in the time of the early Christianity. And that’s why Paul felt that he had to give some advice on the subject. To do so he quoted quite simply one of the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament. It’s the fifth commandment that asks the children to honour their father and mother. There is also the promise linked to it that says if you honour your parents, you will live long in the land of God. Isn’t this indeed an interesting promise, as we human beings today still try to live as long as possible? Only we don’t necessarily try to reach this aim by sticking to the Ten Commandments but more likely by leading a healthy lifestyle. Nowadays we exercise a lot and eat healthy food hoping for a long life. But the questions behind it remain the same: How should I lead my life, for it to be a good one? What shall I do and what shall I avoid, so that I will be blessed on my way? Which ethical guidelines am I supposed to follow and which ones shall I just let go?

I dare to ask you: Have **you** decided on these questions for yourself?

The theologian and coach Urs Bärtschi is convinced that people who know according to which ethical guidelines they want to live are more likely to be successful in life than people who don’t follow a certain code of ethics. Sometimes this may not seem to be true, but in the long term, the truth of what Urs Bärtschi says most often becomes obvious. Don’t we all want to have a successful life? And don’t we wish the same for our children? So this might be one more reason why it is absolutely vital to think about our own ethical guidelines and about which ones we want to pass on to the next generation.

The Bible is a good source for this undertaking, we find there countless answers to these questions. In the Old Testament there is a whole tradition around the subject of wisdom. Books like the Psalms, the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes help the reader to know how to live a life that is good for him or herself, for his or her environment and of course in the eyes of God. The most famous text of this tradition is probably the Ten Commandments, so let us have a closer look at it. Still today they are very well known and even non-Jewish or non-Christians practise most of those rules, such as: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony against

your neighbour and you shall not covet your neighbour's house. I think that these commandments are still the basic foundation of our Western society. So many people actually claim to be living according to the Ten Commandments. They usually tend to forget that there are actually more commandments than those that I have mentioned so far. The first four commandments all describe the relationship between God and us human beings. In Exodus 20, 3 it is said: "You shall have no other Gods before me". And in verse 4: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." I think these two commandments are the most challenging ones in our time. What does it actually mean for us to have one God only and to honour him?

There are many different ways of honouring God and certainly it means something different for the Jews than for the Christians. I personally got a deeper understanding of the impact of that first commandment when I attended a week of training for ministers in Salève, in France two weeks ago. The subject was the life and theology of the reformer Jean Calvin, as we celebrate his 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. One main message of the Reformers was to talk about God's Grace and that human beings don't have to contribute to being saved by doing good works. Contrary to the Roman Catholic Church they pointed out that it is only God's grace that can save us from eternal condemnation. The three reformers Luther, Zwingli and Calvin strongly agreed on that point. This theological conviction is one of the main pillars of the protestant faith. Not to forget that this is also one argument how to justify the baptism of a newborn: The baptism is a way to show that a human being is accepted by God without any effort, but only by grace.

So, if it is all about grace, do we still need to do anything to honour God? Calvin would probably have never asked this question, because it was so clear for him to answer "Yes". Even though he knew that he couldn't contribute anything to gain eternal life, he still lived a very strict religious life. He got up every morning at 5 o'clock and started his day with 2 hours of Bible reading and praying. He openly criticised people who in his opinion didn't live according to Christian ethics and lived himself rigorously according to the Scripture. Calvin therefore made huge religious efforts to honour God. The first aim of his life was to become more and more like Christ. I was impressed to find that a man, who

rejected the need for religious effort on the one hand, was so religiously eager on the other.

I personally found that very inspiring and I felt motivated to look out for new ways of living a life according to the Scripture. Obviously I won't get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to read the Bible. But – I'll try to bear in mind more consciously that it is our duty as Christians to live more and more like Christ. When I was about twenty years old I used to wear one of those bracelets, on which it was written: "What would Jesus do?" These bracelets are not fashionable any more but some of you might have seen them. They were to remind the person to act in the way that they thought Jesus would have acted. Of course it is not always possible to think of what Jesus would have done and even if we think we know it is often impossible to actually do the same. Still I think it can be a very helpful guideline for us Christians today to ask ourselves:

"What would Jesus do?"

Amen