

Service 5th October 2008, Rev Nathalie Dürmüller

Subject: The end of the world, Isaiah 32,1-8 & Revelation 3,14-22

Dear members of the Swiss Church, dear friends

Some weeks ago the newspaper's headlines were full of stories about the experiments that had taken place at the Cern in Geneva. You probably remember that scientists from all over the world made experiments with amazingly fast acceleration of Neutrons. The launch seems to have been a success according to the media. The acceleration worked at once. Nonetheless, to me it didn't become very clear, what the result of this 5 billion Swiss Francs or 2.5 billion Pounds project is.

Obviously they try to find out more about the beginning of the world and about the mysterious black holes in the universe. But is it right to spend such an awful lot of money on this kind of research whilst people in other parts of this world are dying of hunger every day? On the other hand we have to admit that without all the technical developments being made during the last century we wouldn't live such a comfortable life today. I personally haven't found an answer to that question.

But to me as a minister there is also another aspect of this research that attracts my attention. One headline in the NZZ newspaper said: "Gottespartikel und Schwarze Löcher", "Gods Particles and Black Holes". The author Uwe Justus Wenzel pointed out that it is also a metaphysical question that is being asked related to this kind of research. Human beings have always wondered about the beginning and the possible ending of existence. Different answers and concepts were found. It seems that there is a strong need in us to find out more about this very subject. Of course the Bible provides answers to these questions as well.

In the reading of the scripture today we heard two of them. One was taken out of the Old Testament and the second one was from the New Testament. Today I would like to look at what the Bible tells us about the end of the world. To make the visions of these old texts livelier I try to link the biblical ideas of the end of the world with modern concepts of the end of time.

The author of the Isaiah text draws wonderful pictures – it is a “Heilsprophetie” (prophecy of a good future). The prophet talks about a King, who will reign with righteousness and justice. He imagines that there will be a nice shaded and fruitful place for everyone. Let’s listen again to this promising description:

**See, a king will reign in righteousness,
and princes will rule with justice.
Each will be like a hiding-place from the wind,
a covert from the tempest,
like streams of water in a dry place,
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.**

Who doesn’t dream of being in such a wonderful place? Right now if we let our minds wander we can maybe think of a wonderful place on earth that is like such an oasis for us. It might be a place, where you can relax and recharge your batteries. In this place you can be yourself or you can even be the best version of yourself. A few verses later the prophet goes further with his description: He expresses all the hopes that are obviously not being fulfilled in this present life. His descriptions become more concrete when he talks about people’s incapacities that will turn into skills: The rash will have good judgment and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly. He gives many examples like this and what he basically does is that he turns everything of this world’s reality

into the opposite. He dreams of a complete and perfect world that might come one day. So it is an absolute positive prophecy of the future playing with opposites to the real world. We know this kind of comparison also from the gospel of Matthew, who cites Jesus' famous antithesis:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This type of prophecy challenges us to rethink our ideas of how we expect things to be on earth. It gives us a new and fresh look at our earthly lives. On the other hand this is also an earth denying point of view. These words say basically: What we live here is nothing compared to what we can expect for the end of days or also for life after death.

I'm sure this thought reminds most of you of a story that is regularly on the news as well. Today we know this kind of arguing from the fundamentalist teaching of some Islamic preachers. Young people are promised that they will have a much better life in heaven if they are willing to give up their lives for Allah. I don't want to say that the biblical text as well teaches us this absurd and wrong promise. Still I would like to show that there can be a negative side to so positive a prophecy. In Isaiah 32 we can definitely find a certain potential for the text to be misinterpreted in this way. For somebody who is fed up with life on this earth it might be tempting to lose oneself in hopes for a better life after death. We know that in the Middle Ages people were assured they would get this if they were willing to give their money to the church. For years,

this manipulation of people worked very well. Looking back there were different reasons why this kind of manipulation worked so easily. In my opinion one reason for it is that we human beings long for the prospect of a life after death. And this need is still part of us even now in this rational decade as I said earlier in this sermon. The Isaiah text gives us a possible answer to these important questions. Looking at them in the right way can give us hope that things that we are suffering from will be better one day. And that this world's reality is not the only one that counts in the end. Sometimes, when things are not working out very well, this can be a comforting thought. I'm wondering how it would be if people affected by the credit crunch were aware of this Isaiah text. Would they therefore be able to stand back from this catastrophe and see it with less doom and gloom? From experience I can tell that in some situations it can help to look on misfortune from a philosophical or theological point of view.

The second reading taken from the book of Revelation is about 700 years older than the Isaiah text. So there is quite a gap of time between these two texts. Still the book of Revelation is also a prophecy about the end of the world, but it is unlike the Isaiah prophecy from many points of view. First of all it is a prophecy that is made of terrifying images. The reader of the text becomes frightened at the thought that there will be a last judgment and that everyone will have to repent to get a chance in those last days. If you read this prophecy you might not feel like leaving this earth except if you think that your Christian lifestyle has been so perfect that you don't have anything to fear. So this text can put quite a lot of moral pressure on the reader by asking him not to be lukewarm. This can leave a rather unpleasant feeling if you try to figure out whether you personally might be good enough not to be spat out. I know from experience that in some churches this passage from the Bible is used to

make people do more good works. Obviously this is the negative aspect of this kind of prophecy. On top of this it is also exactly the opposite of the Apostle Paul's preaching, who taught us that we don't have to please God with our good works. Anyway there is also a positive side to be found in this kind of prophecy. I see it in the impact that it can have on our present lives. It can encourage people to take their behavior on this earth seriously. The perspective on a life after death doesn't intend that how we live at the moment is completely unimportant. It is a thought that has more impact on our lives now and promises less for the future. I think today we often come across this concept of thinking. Even though it maybe doesn't seem so at the first glance. You might think: Who in our society cares about the final judgment? Probably people are not too bothered about God's final judgment, but sometimes they act as if at the end of their lives somebody will look upon their works and judge on it. Can there possibly be found a hidden wish to prove that their lives are valuable? Can work give the impression that life is never-ending? Of course I may not be right but I just observe sometimes that people are looking for a substitute to the religious way of explaining things. To give a meaning to existence with work seems to be a commonly accepted method. Clearly the new judge is not God any more but society which decides about ones' success or failure.

The experiments at Cern are also such an example of a modern concept that tries to give answers to the big questions about life. In the week when it was taking place some of the popular press was frightening people with stories about the possibility that the world might be eaten up by the black hole created at Cern. I don't know how many people were actually willing to believe that there was a real danger. But I'm sure there were some who believed it.

Now the final point I should like to make is that the Bible gives us concepts of how to look at the big questions of life and at the same time as we are confronted with the modern way of looking at it. Sometimes we feel that there is a big gap in between these different ways of explaining things. Maybe we even get the feeling that we have to choose between one or the other. I myself try to integrate modern and biblical concepts. Both are good in some respects and in others don't provide the right answer. I feel that we as Christians have a very rich background of knowledge and wisdom that we can find in the Bible. Let us not forget how helpful this knowledge can be.

Amen