

Sermon 1st March 2009, Rev Nathalie Dürmüller

Subject: Amos 5, 11-15, Values in times of crisis

Dear parishioners

Coming back from Switzerland some time ago I picked up a newspaper at the airport to find out about what is happening in London. I was so surprised to see that in this *one* issue there were *three* articles dealing with the subject of faith! I immediately thought that this would never be the case in Switzerland! I feel it's great that religion is a subject that is being spoken about in the UK, whereas in Switzerland religion tends to be a kind of taboo subject. Anyway, one article in this newspaper was about Tony Blair giving a speech in which he mentioned God 31 times. In the article it is explained that Tony Blair converted to Roman Catholicism after leaving Downing Street. I would like to quote what he said about the meaning of religious faith in our time:

“I believe restoring religious faith to its rightful place, as the guide to our world and its future is itself of the essence. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be poorer in spirit, meaner in ambition, less disciplined in conscience if it is not under the guardianship of faith in God.”

This quote really impressed me and it confirmed my presumption that religious values become more important in times of crisis. I believe that especially in these times we desperately need the kind of orientation that religion can give us. People seek for guidelines as things are changing fast and everything seems quite unsecure and unpredictable. Of course there have always been times like this and we are not the first ones that have to deal with this kind of insecurity that we are going through right now. For example Alexander von Schönburg describes in his book “Die Kunst des stilvollen Verarmens”, which could be translated as: “The Art of Impoverishing with Style” how he lost his well paid job as a journalist after the terror attacks of nine/eleven 2001 and how he dealt with it. In his book he gives an accurate and still always humorous analysis of our society. He points out the dangers that the gap between the different social classes will become bigger and bigger if we continue to live like we are living right now. We in the first world spend an awful lot of money on things that we don't necessarily need – and even worse: We take them

for granted! So he predicted that we'll soon have to face hard times, where we will have to learn to renounce many of the comfortable luxurious things. Von Schönburg says that the golden times are gone and that a time of deficiency is approaching. It seems that these times have come faster than one might have expected. Thousands of people in Europe have lost their jobs in the last half a year. Obviously for them this means a lot of changes in their way of living, which again affects many other people in one way or another. But how shall we deal with these inconvenient changes? Von Schönburg gives many fascinating suggestions concerning this question. I would like to quote a paragraph where he explains that the Christian virtues "faith, love and hope" can never be practised too much.

„Man kann nie zu viel lieben, glauben, hoffen. Auch hat man noch nie gehört, dass jemand zu klug, zu tapfer, zu gerecht, oder zu massvoll gewesen sei. In Zeiten des Mangels sind Tugenden also etwas, mit dem man, ohne sich Vorwürfe machen zu müssen, verschwenderisch umgehen sollte... Vielleicht werden manche Tugenden, die im Zeitalter des Überflusses ein wenig aus der Mode gekommen sind, nun, im Zeitalter des Mangels, wieder Renaissance erleben... Wenn Menschen auf gegenseitig Hilfe angewiesen sind, entwickeln sie längst vergessene menschliche Fähigkeiten.“

Von Schönburg proclaims that virtues, in particular Christian virtues and especially the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, restraint and courage will play a more important role in times of crisis. Going through a time of shortage it is necessary to dispense virtues lavishly, because people depend on each other a lot more. Therefore people start developing new capabilities to help each other and they rediscover the old virtues. I found it very inspiring to see that such a successful author like von Schönburg talks about this subject and together with Tony Blair's words it becomes pretty obvious that there is a lot of truth in these theories.

Today bestsellers are telling us where the weak points of society are - in biblical times there were the prophets, who pointed out how people should be living. The prophet Amos wrote his prophetic words when the gap between poor and rich people was growing dangerously fast. He was living in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and thanks to archaeological excavations of the town Tirza we have quite a good knowledge about what was

happening at this time in the Near East. Whereas in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC all the houses had quite the same shape and equipment there is a noticeable change in the houses of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. All of a sudden, there were houses that were bigger and that had more luxurious contents. Therefore we can draw the conclusion that the 8<sup>th</sup> century was a time of social change. This was when not only Amos was active as a prophet but also Mica, Hosea and Protoisaiah. As there was a lot of injustice at the time many prophets felt that they had to speak about how people should live and how they shouldn't. Amos makes the criticism that people were accumulating many things that they actually didn't need. I quote verse 11 of chapter 5:

**Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,  
you will not live in them;  
though you have planted lush vineyards,  
you will not drink their wine.**

Amos condemns people who owned houses built of stone and vineyards that they did not really need. Whereas on the other hand many farmers had lost everything that they had because they hadn't managed to adapt into this new kind of society where the rich decided how things worked. As a result of this they ended up being bondsmen of the rich.

Amos also talks about oppressing the righteous, taking bribes and depriving the poor of justice. Does any of this sound familiar to us? Of course it does, we are still dealing with the same kind of problems in our society. Still today some people become richer and richer often by exploiting the weak to get there. Of course it is not only the extremely rich that are being referred to with these words. Instead every single one of us lives in this way if we think about it in a global context. How else could we buy a bunch of bananas for one pound or a t-shirt for 10 pounds? The questions posed by the prophet Amos still apply to us today. I think it is impressive how biblical texts can have an ongoing meaning in our society! But I don't want to dwell too much on the accusations in the text, for it doesn't help if we blame ourselves for the lifestyle that most of us in the Western World are living. We know only too well about the many different injustices in the world. Instead I want to emphasise the values that are proclaimed in the text:

**“Seek good, not evil, that you may live.”**

In those times of social changes it was too easy to get tempted by the idea of having a more comfortable and easy life. So Amos reminds his readers to seek good and not evil and he links this with the promise of life. This is what I find so remarkable: He doesn't ask the people to do good because this is how they should live – like a commandment that they are supposed to follow. No, he recommends them to seek justice and to live according to religious values because this eventually will lead to a prosperous life. It seems to me that this is also the right way of how we should approach the practice of Christian values today. If we try to love ourselves and our neighbour, if we try to have faith and to always have hope then we should do it because we think this is the best way to live. And because we think that this is also for the good for our society. We consider our daily practise of Christian values as a contribution towards the community and we should realize that this is finally the way to gain a life that is worth living – for everybody.

That's the social aspect of the practice of Christian values. But there is also a further important dimension to it, which is our relationship with God. Amos says:

**„Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you“**

This might sound a bit like a deal: If we seek what is good then God will be with us. I'd rather like to understand this sentence like a promise that we can bear in mind, wherever we go. It is the promise that even if sometimes it is not obvious – God is with us. This sentence is also a kind of encouragement to always try to uphold the values, which we find in the Bible. Even though sometimes it might be tempting to think that life could be easier without them – in the end there is the hope that these values will come uppermost in our society, because they are stronger than all evil and because they eventually lead to life.

Amen