

Sermon The Swiss Church in London

6 February 2011

Subject: Kahlil Gibran's text about children, Genesis 17,15-27

Dear Parishioners, dear friends of the Swiss Church

We have witnessed today the baptism of Isabel Wolfensberger, which is a very joyful occasion for us all, but especially for the family and friends of the relatively new-born. A baptism has many meanings. It is a way of expressing our gratefulness to God for the new life, and of declaring it in front of the congregation. It is also a celebration of the beginning of Isabelle's life. Because as parents, grandparents and godparents you are very grateful for this precious gift that has been given to you. The text by the Arabic author Khalil Gibran that you have chosen illustrates very well how precious this gift is and also what duties go along with it. So I thought it would be worthwhile to also read the English version of the text, so everyone has a chance to understand it.

**Your children are not your children.**

**They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.**

**They come through you but not from you,**

**And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.**

**You may give them your love but not your thoughts,**

**For they have their own thoughts.**

**You may house their bodies but not their souls,**

**For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.**

**You may strive to be like them,**

**but seek not to make them like you.**

**For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.**

**You are the bows from which your children**

**as living arrows are sent forth.**

**The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,**

**and He bends you with His might**

**that His arrows may go swift and far.  
Let our bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;  
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,  
so He loves also the bow that is stable"**  
— Khalil Gibran

This text teaches us about the responsibility that parents have of allowing their children to become their own personalities and to let them go their own way, when it is time for it. This might sound simple but it is certainly not an easy task to fulfil for parents and something that one has to work on as long as the relationship between parents and child exists. It is only natural that when we human beings receive something so precious that we want to keep it as long as possible. And yet the most precious thing that one can receive - a child - one has to let go at some point. It is a very religious thought that Khalil Gibran teaches in this text as it reminds us of the fragility of life, which has been given to us by God. Nobody can contribute anything to receiving his or her own life. The birth of a child is not only in the hands of human beings. And whenever we get to such a point, where we feel something of our human limitation, we touch the boundary of where our faith in God begins. The birth of a new human being is certainly such a moment. But there are other moments within the cycle of life that bring us in touch with this boundary, whether we like it or not, and those question marks appear in our heads and we feel the urge to experience and to know more about this unknown territory, that we call God.

Therefore the Bible is full of stories about life and death and of how human beings struggle and deal with it. The Bible story that we heard earlier, is exactly such a story that talks about Isaac's birth. This story is so important in the Old Testament that we have two different versions of it that follow one after the other and vary quite a bit. I therefore do not want to look at the details but look at the main message, which is for me in the meaning of this special birth of a boy who was to be a key figure in the tribe of Israel. It was already very spectacular that Sarah, who wasn't able to give birth for a very long time, finally had Isaac. With this birth the source for great suffering was ended for her. It is fairly well known that in those times a childless woman was not very respected within her community. And in the case of Sarah she did not even have the social status of her servant Hagar, who had a child with Abraham. So Isaac's birth changed her life dramatically and contributed a lot

to her wellbeing. But also Abraham's life was transformed, because finally he had an heir with his real wife, and one that he even felt was chosen by God. So we see that Isaac was of course not born into a void, but into a situation of different expectations and hopes that were connected to his life. And for the authors of Genesis this was not negative at all, but on the contrary apart from God, only family and tribe were able to give meaning to a human being's life. Therefore it was only normal to expect that a son or a daughter, would do everything to live a life that was in line with the parent's expectations, and that it was a child's duty to make the parents happy.

Comparing the two texts: Isaac's birth with Khalil Gibran's, the differences between them are quite obvious, actually they seem to talk about the exact opposite. For most young parents in the Western world it is probably more favourable to live according to Khalil Gibran's ideal and to give a child the opportunity to become what suits him or her best. On the other hand we all know that a child's life is also very much influenced by its frame of reference, which is given by family and culture. When a child is baptised the parents open up the possibility of getting to know this religious heritage, which might become a frame of reference for a lifetime, for the highlights in life as well as the difficult times. And in this sense it may be for the benefit of this young life to be part of something bigger, that started thousands of years ago and that will go on when we are long gone. Therefore it seems that both aspects are important in a child's life: To have the possibility of becoming the personality that suits him or her best and to have the freedom to live their own life. But also to be born into a stable frame of reference that gives meaning and stability, values and stories that form one's life, is equally important.

Amen