

Service 6 September 2009 13 Sunday after Trinity
Subject: Luke 10, 25-37, The Parable of the Good Samaritan
How to gain eternal life?

Dear Parishioners

Usually I try to begin my sermons with interesting news that I have read somewhere or with a surprising statement, which may help to catch your precious attention. Today I don't need any of this. I don't need it because this Biblical Story is so full of images and surprising anecdotes that I can already be sure to have your full attention already.

It is the famous story about the Good Samaritan, that is only being told in the Gospel of Luke. In German the title of this Bible passage is by the way "Der Barmherziger Samariter" which could be translated into "The Merciful Samaritan" and shows the key point of this story much better, I think. It has become so famous that it has given the name to a medical organisation in Switzerland called "Schweizerischer Samariterbund" and you find similarly named organisations in other countries as well, including Great Britain. I have been told that there is a telephone helpline called the "Samaritans". So the Good Samaritan who helps the wounded soldier lying on the floor is remembered by most of the people for his exemplary merciful behaviour. And that's what people usually remember of this story. When I read through it again to prepare for today's service, I stumbled over the beginning of the story – I hadn't remembered this part, which is actually the starting point of why Jesus told this story about the Good Samaritan. Let me read it to you again:

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

26 What is written in the Law? he replied. How do you read it?

27 He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

28 You have answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live.

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

By reading this passage again I realised that there are actually two main subjects in the story of the Good Samaritan: One is certainly the subject of love and mercy and the other one is the question of how to gain eternal life. So I'm preaching today about the subject of eternal life and at our next Sunday service I shall preach about the Good Samaritans exemplary love.

The introduction gives us a clear picture of the event that happened on that day: Once more Jesus is being challenged by a Rabbi, who was maybe hoping that Jesus would say something that would be in his disfavour, or at least something that was not in line with the Orthodox Jewish teaching of the time. But maybe there wasn't even such an intention in his question and the expert in law was truly interested in what Jesus had to say about the question of how to inherit Eternal life. Possibly he was hoping to find a life changing answer because he was ready to hear something new. If you could ask Jesus this question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Would you be ready to hear a new and unexpected answer? Or do you already know exactly what you believe concerning this subject and are you therefore not prepared to think over it again? I believe one has to be ready to learn something new and if it is the right time it can touch us right in our hearts. Let's see if this story can *today* touch our hearts and teach us in a surprising way.

There are many different answers and beliefs to that very crucial question about life after death. In our Christian tradition it is part of our belief that there is a life after death and that we Christians inherit eternal life after death. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 in quite some detail about this subject, where it becomes clear that the Christian hope of a life after death is based on Jesus' own resurrection. Because Jesus rose from the dead we can also hope that we be resurrected one day. If people look at this question only from a scientific point of view one will claim that human being's bodies become dust after death and that's it. And it is quite difficult to argue against this kind of statement as our belief is based on faith and hope and not necessarily on rational arguments.

I once had an interesting conversation with the New Testament professor at the University of Zurich, where we discuss this subject. He was a very critical text interpreter and a sharp thinker and he challenged me many times because he questioned my faith

in various ways. Nonetheless when it came to the subject of life after death his answer somehow impressed me. He said that in almost all human being's faiths and tradition we can find a belief in life after death. For him this is evidence enough that we humans just seem to have this certainty in our hearts that life on earth is not the only thing but that something continues after our earthly bodies are dead.

So somehow many of us seem to sense that there is a life after death. But now the next question arises: *Who* will inherit this life? The Rabbi who talks to Jesus wants to know what he has to *do* in order to receive this precious gift. When we have a closer look at his questions two beliefs of his become evident. First of all he believes that we humans can actually contribute something in order to inherit eternal life, secondly it becomes clear that he doesn't believe that everybody can inherit it. He probably expected that Jesus would give him a direct answer, but as is typical for Jesus, he didn't. Instead he asked him back:

26 What is written in the Law? And: How do you read it?

By asking so Jesus gives the Rabbi the chance to formulate his own belief in the eternal life. On top of this Jesus makes clear that the answer to that question depends on *how* the Rabbi reads and understands the law. So it is *his* interpretation of the Scripture that gives him an answer to that question.

This is the point where I personally discovered something new through this Bible Story. It made me realize that we all have to find our personal answers and that what we believe when it comes to this matter really counts. When it comes to the question of a possible life after death many Christians refer to the sentence that is found in John chapter 14, verse 6:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.

As a conclusion they argue that one has to accept Jesus in his/her life in order to have access to the Father, which also means to have access to eternal life. But actually reading the story of the Good Samaritan we realise that when Jesus was asked about eternal life directly he said something different or more exactly he asked a question back to confront the Rabbi with his own belief. Therefore I really encourage you to reflect for yourself on that subject. But I'm going give you now my own personal view concerning life after death. And this view has been inspired by Karl

Barth's view on that topic.

Karl Barth was a famous Swiss theologian who took an active part in the group of people who resisted National Socialism during World War II. He is also known for being a traditional if not conservative theologian. Certainly he is not liberal, but when it comes to the point of the resurrection after death he surprises us with quite a liberal view on the subject. Why? Because he actually defends "Allversöhnung/Universal Reconciliation". This means that every human being will have Eternal Life.

Amen