

Sermon 15 March 2009, Rev Nathalie Dürmüller

Subject: Christian Values, Titus 2, 1-15

Dear Parishioners, dear friends of the Swiss Church

I am sure you have all noticed the nice purple flag hanging from the pulpit down here. It is the colour of the period of Lent that we are in right now. I think it is great that the Dutch Church actually pays attention to the colour of the time of the Church year. It is quite unusual for a church in the Protestant tradition to do so. There is no such a tradition in the Swiss Church either. But maybe this could be something to think about introducing when we are back in our own church. What do you think?

Anyway, Lent is of course a time of fasting and praying. Even though it is not very much a Protestant tradition to do so it becomes more and more significant for us, too. I know many Protestants who like to renounce some things during the time of Lent, because it helps to practise self-restraint and might even help you to lose some unwanted pounds or be a good thing for your liver if you renounce alcohol. Many people also like to particularly focus on their spirituality during this time of the year. They spend more time with God in prayer and they deliberately use their time to reflect, because they are seeking a more quiet time in their hectic daily routine. Whoever has ever experienced this kind of spirituality knows how blessed one can be by this practice.

Nevertheless the reformers didn't really like the tradition of fasting; they even fought against it. In 1522 Christoph Froschauer and the reformer Huldrych Zwingli with some like-minded friends started to eat sausages, eggs, cheese and other forbidden food during the time of Lent. This act was an absolute provocation at the time and has become famous under the name of "Froschauer Wurstessen". People at the time were shocked – how did these men dare to eat sausages in public during this time of the year? They did it of course, because they had a message that they wanted to spread. After that provocation Zwingli wrote a text about the subject of the free choice of food. He argued that fasting wasn't actually a law that can be found in the Bible and therefore to eat this delicious

food was not a sin. Of course the reformers also fought against the hypocrisy that they noticed in the Catholic Church at the time. People, including Priests, were pretending to lead a strictly religious life, but when nobody was watching they would still do, whatever they wanted. But for the reformers the most important thing was that acts were in keeping with what people believed in, which means in the end in keeping with what the Scripture said. That's why they focused on the *attitude* that was actually *behind* an action. Therefore the practice of Christian values and virtues were one thing that they were very much interested in.

Well I have already been preaching about Christian values in the last two services. But I hope you share my fascination for this subject! Today I want to take a different approach to it. I have already preached about the values that we want to transmit to our children and I concluded that to find our own values we can find direction in the way Jesus lived. Then last Sunday I spoke about the significance of values in times of crisis. My sermon was more focused on how values apply in our society. Today I would like to go one step further and make it more concrete. I want to reflect on which virtues we are supposed to practice as Christians. Today's reading from Titus gave us many hints concerning Christian virtues. Let us listen to the word of the Scripture again:

**<sup>2</sup>Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.**

**<sup>3</sup>Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. <sup>4</sup>Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, <sup>5</sup>to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. <sup>6</sup>Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled.**

First I have to admit that some of the advice irritates me a bit. For us it is very old-fashioned to say, that women should be busy at home and subject to their husband. In our modern society most of us agree that women should be allowed to have their own work and live a more independent life than they did at that time. Besides this, one might wonder why there is such an extensive list of dos and don'ts in this letter. This has to do with the historical context of the origin of Titus. Titus is part of the letters called "pastoral letters", which includes the first and second book of Timothy and Titus. These letters were written to form and

establish the first Christian communities. In those days they started to organize their parishes better and they chose the same way as the Jews. Therefore they designated Presbyters and Elders. Besides these organisational matters there were also strict ethical rules needed so they could be sure that the new parishes would flourish. We all know that there is nothing worse for the growth of a parish than having disunity in its congregation. On the contrary: If a parish practises strict ethical rules it helps to attract people from the outside. Therefore the importance of having ethical rules was regarded as vital. So let us have a closer look at those ethical guidelines.

Be self-controlled! This rule is mentioned three times in this short paragraph so this must have been considered as a key issue. The yearning for self-control was also an important topic in Stoicism, which was a fashionable philosophy in the time of Early Christianity. So, it was easy for people to understand why it was a good thing to be self-controlled. Still today I think we generally agree that we should strive for self-control. So this is nothing that really surprises us. I think none of us wants to lose self-control in front of other people. The advice to be *temperate* and *worthy of respect* are of course related to the practice of self-control. Christians are asked not to lose their temper and to live a life in modesty and with respect for other people. Also Aristotle who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (384-322 BC) said that one should try to reach the “mesotes” which means the good middle when it comes to virtues. His advice was never to exaggerate, but enjoy everything modestly. How up to date this advice is! If we think of how young people like to go “binge drinking”, which involves drinking with the only aim to get drunk, or if we think of how extensive the bonuses are that some managers receive and many other examples where people really go over the top we realize how good it would be if more people would try to practice self-control and moderation.

But of course this is all but an easy thing to realize! Most human beings - if not all - like to exaggerate from time to time and it is within human nature to long for more. So how can it ever be possible to practice these high aims? The same question arises when we consider the next piece of advice given in Titus, which is to *be sound in faith, in love and in endurance*. Of course it would be great to always live according to this ideal. People who go to church usually want to have faith, they try to live a life in love and they practise endurance. I would say most of the time we actually manage to live according to these virtues. But we all know that sometimes it is just too hard and we fail. Sometimes we don't even find the energy to give our best or we simply forget about Christian virtues. As Christians we cannot avoid experiencing of how limited one is

when it comes to the practice of virtues. And this is exactly where the danger of this whole matter is – it can put you under a lot of pressure. I would say most people who are practising Christians already try hard to give their best. Therefore I believe that there is no need to emphasise this pressure. It can often be counterproductive to have fixed rules that tell us how to live. They might even prevent people from living according to them. So the key thing for me is to find a good way of handling these rules that are certainly useful for our lives. I think the only way to get there is by trying to find your own personal virtues. This means to find the virtues that have been proven to be the ones that are helpful for you as a person. You might even have neglected them at some point only to find out that life is much better with these virtues. So I would encourage us to handle virtues freely and to always try and listen to our inner voice of what is right and what is wrong. How we act should always be in accordance with this inner voice, because if we just practice Christian virtues because we feel the pressure to do so, we are certainly not practicing the one main virtue which is love!

Amen