Panel 24: 500 Jahre Reformation: Das Wort Gottes und das Leben der Christen
Panel 24: 500 Years After the Reformation: The Word of God and the Christians’ Life

I would like to start with a little story: A very devout Christian wants to do everything right. No lukewarm commitments, but a Christian life 100 % according to God’s will. He wants to live according to the Word of God, not according to his own likings. His solution: From now on he will randomly open the bible and then act exactly as it is written down there. Surely, God’s Holy Spirit will guide him in the process without failure. Eagerly he proceeds to his first try, randomly opens the bible and reads Mathew 27,5: “Judas went and hanged himself”. “Well that can’t be” he thought, “surely I should give it another try”. This time the bible opened up to Luke 10,37: “Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

What can we learn from this short story? If we approach the topic “The Word of God and the Christians’ Life” we need a mature Christian approach to the understanding of the bible and good bible hermeneutics.

Celebrating the 500th commemorations of the reformation it makes sense for us Lutherans to have another look at Luther in regard to this topic. Luther reminds us that we Christians don’t believe in the bible as such or have faith in the bible. Rather, the bible is the Word of God in a very specific way: The Word of God is predominantly and first of all the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ himself is the word – logos – of God. Thus, he is the center of Holy Scriptures. And this gospel of Jesus Christ wants to
evoke faith and certitude in us. The Word of God is a word of affection, love and peace. And it is a word of empowerment. Empowerment happened in 1989, when a whole nation in the East of Germany arose. Women and men stood up to get back their dignity — empowered not by themselves, but by God’s word. Recognizing that the most powerful weapon is something that doesn’t look like a weapon at all: God’s grace, charity towards your neighbor and an upright walk. Equipped with God’s word, they went out and took the streets — hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands. And a government with forces armed to the teeth encounters faces of men and women who are walking upright and confronting it — with candlelight. It is only then that the forces surrender — to people who trust in God’s word. You all know these stories of overwhelming success, but I’m sure you also experienced conflicts and dissent when it comes to interpreting God’s word. We often wrestle and struggle to interpret the bible in the same way. This is true between the different churches, but also within them. Especially in regard to the ethics we come at times to different conclusions. I will come back to that a bit later. But nevertheless, I believe that one thing is very clear. If a word is not a word of affection, love and peace, if it is not a word that empowers people but subdues them, then it is not the Word of God.

Another insight continues to be important for us Lutherans: To live according to the Word of God is nothing we can force, plan or make happen by ourselves. Rather we are captured and moved by the gospel through the Holy Spirit. By the Holy Spirit we can experience that the Word of God becomes a life changing truth for us - a truth that sets us free, empowers us, fills us with divine love and affection. And this guidance of the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with opening the bible randomly and hoping for direction. When we are touched by the word of God, we then also want to live accordingly. We are called by the gospel into the discipleship. We are asked to go out into the world and proclaim the love of God. Discipleship means that we correspond the divine love with our own lives. For Martin Luther, Christ — the living Word of God, preached in the gospel — is not only the gift for our salvation (donum) but also an example (exemplum) for our Christian life. Jesus Christ exemplifies charity and his followers we empowered to do likewise.

Discipleship is never lived in solitude. Disciples are never loners. A follower of Christ should be signposts pointing others to the love and peace of God, which God offers to every human being. And at the same time a follower of Christ should be open to the insights of others so they may become signposts of God’s love to him. Living out of the Word of God, we take responsibility for others and others for us. And in this dialogue and encounter with the others, sometimes even strangers, we learn to see the world, ourselves and our church with different eyes. The mutual support will encourage us to listen more closely to the Word of God and to show our faith more clearly in public.

Christian discipleship sets us off to a new path. A path of new experiences, new encounters, new perspectives. Disciples must take chances and come out of their comfort zone. Others might not understand what and who guides us, why we live out of the Word of God. Thus, following Jesus Christ might lead us into hostile environments.
It is not an easy to promote a path of peace and love. But this is the example given to us by Jesus Christ.

Talking of new perspectives, I think of Dalit-Women and Dalit-Men and their children in India – those who are outcastes, those who are untouchable, those who are suppressed. They now can arise and stand up, because they read and hear from the bible: You are precious, beloved children of God! You are made in His image and likeness. You are of invulnerable value – not because of how you were born, what you achieved in life, what nation you belong to or whatever colour your skin is. No! GOD granted you your value. You carry a “foreign dignity”, Luther once said. And those people arise. The downfallen and downhearted, those depressed and dispirited stand up, and they do so in church. The image of God becomes a political message. And so, the word of God sets up new perspectives on all our lives.

However, as we all now, sometimes new perspective and the dialogue even among other Christians might be irritating. I already mentioned it. Often the values, the culturally influenced patterns of behavior and also the interests of Christians from other churches or other parts of the world are clearly different from ours: in regard to the roles of men and women, the ordination of women, the attitude to marriage, family and sexuality or the assessment of economic structures – just to name a few examples. But listening to each other helps. It helps to understand, for example, that our wealth here in Europe leads to poverty in other parts of the world. Climate change is not encountered either by ignoring it or getting out of international treaties, but by listening to others and acting upon it.

On my travels, I also had to learn: colonialism and apartheid are not over. Partnership work among the churches can help make us sensitive. If one looks carefully enough he can find the still existing traces of colonialism here in Europe among us, but also in many of partner churches.

But exactly in the case of such irritating, even controversial topics partnerships among churches and Christians can stand the test. And with our partnerships we can give testimony to a globalized world full of irritations and conflicts. Here, in and between the churches, a space can arise that cannot be found in the secular economies and politics. A space where people engage with each other and commit themselves to the wellbeing of their brothers and sisters. Listening to the Word of God and to others we can create a space, where we endure what is strange to us; a space where trust can grow and where we learn to be respectful and appreciate to each other in our differences.

We can do so because as disciples of Christ we are all part of the one body of Christ. We hear the one Word of God, we follow the one example Jesus Christ. Living out of the one Word of God we are set on a path of love and peace.