

God's Power in Clay Vessels

Sermon for Epiphany

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 4:3-7



And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and

not to us.

There are many similarities between car salesman, Wolf Warncke, and me, a missionary. I always thought that I could learn a lot about being a missionary from Wolf Warncke, that's why I like chatting with him. For example, a few days ago, he made this astonishing remark: "For me, it's not about selling cars, it's about people. When someone comes to me and wants to buy a car, I initially only see the person in front of me and don't even think about selling him a car. 95% of the time, I don't sell a car at all, but take care of the people's needs and try to help them." Maybe I don't even need to say that Wolf Warncke is known far and wide and people travel hundreds of kilometers to buy a car from him and no one else. Why is that? The only reason can be this – people sense genuine enthusiasm from him for his work. It's not about sales statistics and revenues, but solely about his work! And such genuine enthusiasm continues to spread.

As we celebrate Epiphany today, we too get to see genuine enthusiasm because we hear about the wise men from the East who traveled over 1,000 kilometers. They do that for one single reason – they want to see Christ. Have you ever wondered what the point was in taking such a long and dangerous trip in the first place? Was it just because they wanted to give a child gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Surely there was someone else who could have done that for them. No, even at the first Christmas, it is not about what is gained but about the Child. It's about Christ. It was about His person and nothing else. Naturally, at the same time, not everyone was similarly enthusiastic: We read about Herod who was not at all pleased that this Child came into the world. Herod didn't want anything to do with this Jesus. Quite the opposite. He would like to extinguish the Child's Light forever. At Epiphany, it is all about this Light that God sent to the world through Jesus. But as it always was, next to the light of Jesus is so much darkness and opposition.

Paul writes about this in the sermon text for today: *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.* The Apostle Paul could relate to all this from his own life. He also couldn't immediately recognize the light of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Gospel was hidden from him. He even wanted to get rid of Christ and the idea of Jesus in general as quickly as possible. Paul was blinded, he thought that he was on the right path and on God's side but in reality, he was just as lost and a child of Satan's as Herod in the Christmas story. You can see again and again how terrible this blindness can be. There are even people in our own day and age who are blinded. In very extreme ways, we see people oppressing other people or waging war against them in God's name. There is a terrible darkness and a blindness that can drive us to despair. And this isn't just in distant countries, but also among us because we also see among us fewer and fewer people who are willing to follow Christ, to go to church, or to believe in God. People leaving the church in the western world is devastating. And we ask ourselves, are the people who left less religious than we are? Are they blind? Or can it be that we who are in the church are also blinded and that's why people can no longer recognize Christ in us? Often the abuse scandals of the church are referenced as the reason why people leave the church. Not only because of the various scandals but in general, we should ask these questions: can it be that we Christians have also hidden the light of the Gospel? Can it be that people have not just left the church, but that we Christians have also left Christ and are blinded? And because we have done that, have we also distanced ourselves from others? Have we not been far too preoccupied with ourselves than with the people who so desperately need the

Gospel? And since we have so often separated ourselves from the Gospel, are we preoccupied with pointless arguments instead of the matter at hand? Or is it perhaps that we are concerned with making ourselves great and strong instead of clearly and distinctly proclaiming Christ.

The question, where is God in all this, also belongs to all these other questions. Paul tells how the light of the Gospel is comparable with the first day of Creation. This means that a light shone in the dark night which made everything bright. And that is simply because God made the light and Paul is also the one who could report from his own experience how God shone a bright light into his own heart so that he was ready to drop everything and follow this Christ. Paul recognized this Christ through his weakness and not through his own power and strength. Seeing God in one's weakness was an important realization for the apostle Paul. What is the meaning of this? To explain this, Paul uses an image from the Old Testament. Here, the person is just a clay vessel that God makes. A clay vessel was a tool in the Biblical world with which one could fetch or hold water. Naturally, such a vessel had a limited lifespan – at some point, it shattered or simply became brittle and had to be thrown away. The archaeological excavations that we can see today are often a huge broken pile of such vessels that once were of use. And this is the comparison that Paul gives us. Our life is precisely like just such a vessel! How many times has everything that we have dreamed and worked for just shattered and broken? Our life is in a constant process of dying. It is just a question of time, of when we will also land on the pile of broken pieces. Is there any room at all for God? Paul paints us a picture of human weakness so that we don't fall prey to a dangerous deception because it is always possible that we categorize human understanding, human feelings, or even human strength as divine. The Corinthians did exactly that. They elevated the human spirit and human reason to a god-like level. They believed that people already had divine sparks within them and only had to ignite those sparks. No, Paul says. We are just chipped pottery, nothing more than that.

And yet, God can start something good with just such pottery. The same God who created the universe out of nothing, He can also let new light and life shine forth from our broken lives! Jesus Christ put on the shattered image of a human body and face, not only so that He would die with us, no, He rose again from the dead as a broken person so that we also can be raised again from the dead! "God wants to dwell in darkness and yet has illuminated it!" writes the poet, J. Klepper. At Christmas in Bethlehem, God wanted to become man in the little baby in the manger. Today, God wants to dwell in people with His Spirit and Light! We can also be light – for ourselves and for others! We can do that even when our lives are often completely broken and even when we are threatened and persecuted from all sides. Because we know that Jesus can shine into just such broken vessels as we are.

Being light to others is our task in life as Christians. Our faith should shine for the doubting people and let new hope shine in. Our love should illuminate suffering people. "You are the light of the world!" Jesus says in His sermon on the mount. That's why God let's this light shine into our hearts too.

We see Him and His bright light in the midst of our weakness. Søren Kierkegaard explained all of this in a wonderful story that I want to tell here: a king and a poor man go to a theater. The king traveled in a brightly lit up carriage. All over the carriage, bright lights shine so that the whole street is brightly illuminated as the king passes by. The poor man walks across back alleys without any kind of lighting to get to the theater. Now Kierkegaard asks: Which of these men can see the heavens better? The king with all his splendor and illumination could dazzle the passersby and everyone else in the immediate vicinity with his light. But in so doing, he made the starlight invisible to himself. However, the poor man didn't have a single lamp, but his eyes were opened. He could see and appreciate the stars in all their brightness. He had a greater and better light!

In the example mentioned at the beginning of the car salesman who sells the most cars despite not meaning to at all, it becomes clear that the matter by itself is important. I must thank him for showing me that because it is even more important for us in the church. It's not about being stronger, richer, more convincing, even being bright stars – it's about Christ shining through us. Amen.