

## Being a Christian and Praying

Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter – *Rogate*

Sermon Text: 1 Timothy 2:1-6a



*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. <sup>3</sup>This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, <sup>4</sup>who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. <sup>5</sup>For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who gave Himself as a ransom for all...*

“What? You’re a Christian? I don’t understand, you seem so normal!” We all have heard such remarks from friends and acquaintances. But it could be much worse: in the refugee camps, being a Christian can be downright dangerous. Even in daily life, it can be hard to live as a Christian. Of course, standing on the side of the road dressed as a pastor is less of a problem because people already know he’s a pastor and classify him as harmless. But woe to the Christian who clearly confesses that he believes in Jesus Christ and His resurrection and that salvation is found only in Christ and not in anyone else – then people can become quite critical and sometimes this criticism comes from unexpected sides.

As the person affected, we often stand helpless like drenched dogs in the rain and wonder what to do next. We are unsure what we should say to the people outside and how we should behave. I asked myself why it’s like this. Why are most religions or philosophies admired or respected while Christianity is despised? The reason for this is often that certain faiths offer a program to improve the world or to at least promise a better life. People expect religion to make us into better people or to at least give us good feelings. Contrary to that, Christianity sees us first and foremost as human beings before God. From this understanding comes a completely different perspective on our lives. The Church is not constantly searching for moral guiding principles or saints, but it orientates itself on one person – Jesus Christ! He is the key to understanding who we are before God and what our purpose is. He is the bridge builder between man and God and shows us the way both here on earth and in eternity. This is also described in today’s text from 1 Timothy: *“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...”* (1 Tim. 2:5) So the question is not what we do but what our Lord Jesus does. And this is also explained in 1 Timothy – He is the mediator and brings together what usually doesn’t belong together: God and men. God, who is far away from our problems here on earth and is without sin, is brought near to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us to understand that life is not about wedging ourselves into a routine on this earth for 70 or 80 years. He calls us to recognize that there is much more than just this and He reminds us that much of what we hold tightly to is nothing in light of eternity. He also reminds us that death is not as great a catastrophe as we make it out to be. He encourages us to not look at our weaknesses and problems as the giant mountains we have made them into. This letter to Timothy urges us, despite all weakness and feeble faith as well as criticism from outside, to be Christians and to do what is actually self-evident: to speak with Christ, in other words, to pray. The church doesn’t need saints, but people who have understood that we have an almighty God who has overcome our death and therefore our weaknesses. The church doesn’t need saints, it needs people who pray, who also understand all of this. When Jesus was traveling with His disciples, He saw the needs and powerlessness of the people and said: *“Look, they are like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Matt. 9:36) What would Jesus say to us today? What would He say about our church? What would He say about the situation here in Germany where fewer and fewer people believe in God? *“Look, they are like sheep without a shepherd.”* Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t then say: *“So do something about it. Finally, pursue mission work, prove your moral superiority with concrete proof, so that others may also come to Christ.”* No, Jesus simply says: *“Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest...”* (Matt. 9:38a) So in the face of the plight of the Church in general and in the face of the plight that we ourselves experience from day to day, we should entrust the whole situation to Him who alone knows how to advise us: God Himself. When we pray, we recognize and confess that strength doesn’t or can’t come from ourselves, but only from God. When we pray, we don’t draw from our

own reserves, and we don't search within ourselves for solutions. No, when we pray, we stand completely open to God and His help. We expect that Jesus will fill our empty hands. But our prayer isn't spoke into an empty room – this is different from Buddhism where you get lost in deep meditation to distract yourself from the problems of the world. Nor is our prayer the indulgence of feelings. Christian prayer is closely connected to what God Himself sets before us. Just like when the disciples asked: "Lord, teach us to pray (Luke 11:1b)," Christ didn't say that they should rely on their feelings, but He clearly taught them: "When you pray, say" and He taught them to pray the Lord's prayer. So our prayers aren't spoken into some empty room, but they are closely connected to the prayers God gives us in His Word. Our prayers continuously flow out from this Word and also lead us back there again. When 1 Timothy speaks about prayers, thanksgivings, and songs of praise, he means concrete and known prayers that probably originate from the book of Psalms. These prayers give us comfort, even when we can no longer pray or when we can't think of anything to pray, even at times when we can no longer grasp what we should pray.

And that's why our prayers also aren't just left in an empty room, because they relate to our environment and to our present situation. We are moved when we hear that the Church is suffering and that people leave it. That's why we pray for the Church. We are moved by the fact that many people in many countries suffer under unjust governments. We are also moved by the fact that not all our political systems run according to God's will and plan. All of this concerns us as Christians, and we also bring these problems before God in our daily prayers. Bonhoeffer once said: "Whoever wants to sing Gregorian chants should also speak up for the Jews." By saying this, Bonhoeffer wanted to express exactly what has always been a temptation for Christians: when everything in the world becomes chaotic and we no longer understand many things and feel let down by the government, we should pray for them and not withdraw.

And all of this still has a purpose. God wants us to pray for ourselves and for all people so that they believe in God and come to Him. It may be that we have the goal of a quiet and peaceful life in mind, but God's objective is even more than that. He wants all people to be helped so that they can inherit eternal life.

At the time, the first Christians could have withdrawn quietly and secretly. They could have hidden in a closet to pray and care only about themselves. But they didn't do that because they knew that wasn't God's plan. At that time, the emperor was a state cult and commitment to God and Jesus Christ was in contradiction to this. That's why Christians were frequently executed. Despite this, they confessed that Christ is the Lord of the Church and He alone. Perhaps we too should have the courage to stand by our weaknesses and talk about them. This won't harm the Church, on the contrary. It will make it clear that salvation doesn't come from ourselves and it does not depend upon what we do. Salvation comes from God and His grace and mercy to us. This is what we should magnify today. "Lord, teach us to pray." Amen.