

What Does God Think About Our Worship?
Sermon for Estomihi – the Last Sunday before Lent
Sermon Text: Amos 5:21-24



“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²² Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. ²³ Take away from Me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

There are worlds between how we are and how we want to be! Jewish journalist, Marcel Reif, quoted a striking sentence from his father in Yiddish on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the German parliament: “Be a person.” The sentence moved many people. Perhaps precisely because humanity is not in good shape, and we are reminded that people are cruel! When we come to such human failings in the church, we often say: “people are people!” With this, we are also trying to say that we aren’t taking the path God expects us to. When we make the circle even smaller and talk about ourselves, it is truly embarrassing because there isn’t a day that goes by in which we notice how miserable and cruel we are. This leaves us breathless. Often, we lose the courage to do something because the pit between God’s Will of how a person should be and our actions appears to be insurmountable. In the midst of this horrible chasm between divine righteousness and inhumanity, the prophet Amos speaks. His words are a court verdict. Amos is not a social prophet who strives for a better humanity. Even though he denounces the injustice of the rulers of the time towards the poor, he is not only concerned with exposing these cruel actions so that people improve themselves, rather he wants to proclaim that the judgement has already been made. The people have violated God’s righteousness and there is no longer an escape. Amos is in clear contradiction to the entire population of his time. In the practices of the Temple at that time, the people brought their sacrifices, whereupon the corrupt priests publicly proclaimed: “This sacrifice is pleasing in the sight of God!” But Amos burst into such a gathering without any introduction and publicly proclaims: “That’s not right! God doesn’t like it! To tell you the truth, He abhors your worship and finds it so vile that it has such a horrible stench to Him!”

Be that as it may, we want to note that the prophet Amos spoke God’s Word in his time, but that God’s Word is still valid in our time. In fact, the images that the prophet uses come from a different time with a different relationship to God. We don’t sacrifice burnt offerings. We no longer know about grain offerings or the fat of peace offerings. Harps are now replaced with the organ, and there is hardly any mention of the noise these days. The worship services I have experienced in the church have mostly been pretty decent, and there’s nothing too horrible happening during them. Yet I believe that God’s criticism also pertains to us. What does it mean if God takes no delight in our worship?

Today, I think it’s about a very fundamental thing – we want to dispose of God with our well-intentioned sacrifices. Here are three examples of this: I know a person who had reached a point in his life where everything seemed so confusing that he simply couldn’t get any further on his own. He gambled away all his money on horseraces and ultimately lost his job. His marriage and family stood on the brink of collapse. In his despair, he remembered God and the church. He expected the pastor and church to help him, that they should make everything right again. How? Well, the man made many proposals – he promised to go to church more often from now on and he started praying in the morning and evening, at least he tried to. What came of it was this: he sacrificed his time and devotion to God, or at least he tried to, in order to receive something from God. It was a deal, a trade, with God along the lines of: “I’ll give You this, if You give me that.”

Here’s another example: Someone had an accident and barely escaped death. The shock stayed with him for days afterwards. He announced that he would fast during Lent and do many other things such as

donate to the church, etc. In any case, he thought: "God saved me, so I want to give Him something." The same trade as before but backwards. Here, the man no longer tries to achieve something, but gives thanks for what has been achieved with this or that sacrifice. This too is a transaction, a trade, with God. We could say, well, at least this person managed to say thank you. How many people accept God's help and protection without saying thank you! We can certainly say that, and it is surely true!

But I still have a third example, and this will perhaps be familiar to us. I sit here in the worship service and solemnly confess my sins and receive Jesus' body and blood as the forgiveness of my sins. However, during confession, I can't think of any sin. Instead, I admire the great style that certain members of the congregation have and at communion, I am somehow moved by the music, yet I find myself thinking about the roast dinner I'll enjoy after the service. I catch myself thinking about these things and am happy that the thoughts don't disturb the grand worship service. The service can come to a solemn end, undisturbed by my thoughts and I look at the clock to see it lasted one hour and fifteen minutes – not too long, not too short... well done! Is that supposed to be wrong? It could be different – it could be that I no longer come to church at all. Yet the word of the prophet stands persistently against us. It shows us that even the most pious impulses are characterized by selfishness, because we fake what is not reality to God and to other people so God's righteousness is turned into human selfishness, and God can't stand such sacrifices. We can't absolve ourselves and say, "this seems like human work," because it is not our divine work and therefore it isn't true! *Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

God is once and for all above our attempts to impress Him. He doesn't need our involvement, not in worship nor in everyday life. He is not dependent upon us showing Him what great Christians we are! Yet God says: *"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* This is how the prophet of God imagines the justice that will be poured out on the whole land. The prophet Amos sees this justice and speaks about it, even though the judgment on the people had already been carried out. The people have neither improved nor been saved by God's judgment. Everything has been fulfilled as the prophet foretold, and Israel has been taken into exile to pay for its iniquity. This example makes it clear that God does not fail in His justice against and despite all evil. God's justice should flow like water, but this justice also has a downside that is directed against us. It has a high price. The price of God's justice is so great that it must kill us. That is why these very words about God's righteousness accuse us, because the price is too high, and we can't pay it. Let's go back to the image of the Israelite priest who declared the sacrifices of the congregation to be acceptable before God. Despite all the hypocrisy, this priest points to a miracle that would happen in the future – the miracle of the cross. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross fulfills all the righteousness that we lack. In Jesus, God comes to be among us and amazingly says: "This sacrifice is pleasing to Me! This sacrifice has paid the price!" God has not simply removed the blatant injustice throughout the millennia, including that of our time. He does not pass over it lightly, but He Himself endures hell for this blatant injustice and sets the cross of Jesus Christ against our inhumanity. Amos didn't speak too harshly or just to the people of His time. If righteousness is to flow like streams of water, this is a prophetic word that Amos already uses to refer to Jesus. The righteousness we need to be righteous before God has come to us in the streams of His blood. Only from His righteousness can we ourselves be righteous. God must and will enforce His justice – even in us! For the sun of the Son of God has risen upon us and has conquered justice once and for all. That is why He shines His life on us and makes it very bright in and around us. We certainly can't shine our own light, our own justice. However, what we can do is this: Pass on His radiance. Let His bright light shine among people, not as a sacrifice, not even as thanks. No, but as a self-evident act by people who are touched by God's great radiance. Freely, just as God shines on us, full of joy and happiness because that is part of God's nature. Then no one should be surprised when someone looks and says: "That was a person!" Amen.