

## Seeing God

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 4:6-10



*For 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. <sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*

Where is God? It's not just children who ask this question. It's also a burning question for people in great need or people who simply want to know whether or not it is possible to see God with their human eyes. The desire to see God is not new. Even Moses wanted to see more of God, yet he was not permitted to physically see God. In Islam, it is considered a sin to depict God in a picture. For example, Islamic writings curse Michelangelo for depicting God as an old man. But there are also Christians even today who want to ban the idea of painting pictures of God. Jesus says, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9b) In his song of praise that we sing weekly during the liturgy of Holy Communion, old Simeon sings: “for my eyes have seen Your salvation...” (Luke 2:30) But we don't have a picture of Jesus or any kind of drawing of Him. What is it like to see God? The Corinthians, to whom Paul wrote this letter, also thought they could actually see and feel God. They even thought that they could do everything better than everyone else. That's why Paul must admonish them. We can see God but only in a state of weakness. To see in weakness? What is that supposed to mean? To explain this, Paul uses an image from the Old Testament. In this example, man is just a clay jar that God has created (see Isaiah 64:8). In the Biblical world, a clay jar was a tool you could use to fetch water or to store water. Of course, such a vessel only had a limited lifespan. At some point, it would become fragile or simply shatter and have to be thrown away. Archeological digs that we can see today are often huge piles of broken bits of pottery that once had a use. And it is precisely this comparison that Paul places before us. Our life is like this kind of jar! How often has everything we've dreamed of and longed for simply shattered and broken? Our life is in a constant process of dying. It is only a question of time until we land on this pile of broken pieces. Is there even room for what is divine? Paul paints a picture of human weaknesses for us so that we don't fall victim to a dangerous deception because there is always the possibility that we categorize human understanding or human feelings or even human strength as something divine. The Corinthians did exactly that. They elevated human intellect and human reason into realms of the divine. They believed that people already had a spark of the divine within them and just had to ignite it. No, Paul says. We are just chipped pottery, nothing more than that.

And yet, God can make something good out of such pottery. The same God who made the world from nothing can also let new light and life shine out of our broken lives! Jesus Christ took on the broken flesh of a man. He didn't do that just so that He could die with us. No, He rose again as a broken man so that we may also rise again! “God wants to dwell in darkness and yet has illuminated it!” says the poet J. Klepper. At Christmas in Bethlehem, God wanted to become human as a little baby in the manger. Today, God wants to dwell in people with His Spirit and His light! In this way, we can be His light to one another! We can do that even if we are often completely broken in our lives and even if we are threatened and persecuted from all sides because we know that Jesus can shine into broken jars like us.

To be light for others is our life's mission as Christians. Our faith should shine for doubting people and give them new hope. Our love should shine on people in need. "You are the light of the world," said Jesus in His sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:14a). That's why God also shines this light into our hearts.

We see Him and His bright light in the midst of weakness. Søren Kierkegaard described all of this with a wonderful example: two people go to the theater – the king in his brightly lit carriage with one similarly brightly lit coach driving ahead and another following behind. All over the carriage, bright lights are mounted so that the entire street is lit up when the king drives by. The second person going to the theater is a poor man who walks through side streets without any kind of light. Kierkegaard now asks: which of these two men can see the sky the best? The king, with all his splendor and lighting, could dazzle passers-by and everyone else in the immediate vicinity with his light. But because of this, the starlight is hidden from him. However, the poor man doesn't even have a lamp. But his eyes are open, and he can see and appreciate the stars in all their great brightness.

When it comes to recognizing God, people have repeatedly made the mistake of the vain king. They would rather shine themselves than let God's splendor shine. The pharisee in his self-righteous delusion comes before the face of God and boasts about his own righteousness. He perceives himself as a true light when compared to the tax collector who meekly stands near the pharisee. The pharisee was so dazzled by his own light that he couldn't even see God's light anymore.

The apostle Paul himself describes his service of the Gospel as a ministry in weakness. Paul himself is nothing but a clay jar. What Paul actually means by this is unclear – perhaps through some speech problems or maybe due to his many injuries in the course of his ministry as an apostle or perhaps even that he simply couldn't speak with very impressive words like so many others. That's why the Corinthians scorned him. They hadn't imagined God's glory in this manner. This is not a coincidence. It is God's way to reveal Himself in the weak, lowly, and unsightly. Jesus Himself is born as a human – God in a human clay jar. His word is also adapted in a very human way to the circumstances of His time. It is so human that it has adapted to the eventful history of human development. In this sense, His word is also subjected to human criticism. Jesus Himself, like His Word, can't be recognized as the word of God at first glance nor are baptism or Christ's body and blood at Holy Communion recognized as God's power. Just as the church has repeatedly faced and suffered from persecution and normal human weaknesses. Paul himself can best explain how it happens that weak people still see Christ. When he was still called Saul and persecuted Christians, he had to have already known who Jesus was and who Christians are. Nevertheless, this same Saul ruthlessly persecuted Christians and the church. The God of the universe blinded Saul, yet the light of the Lord Jesus Christ shone into Paul's heart. What happened on the road to Damascus reminds us of God's creating Word: "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). Christ Himself met Paul on that path and called him, and that's when the light began to shine into Paul's heart. His life would take a very different turn. And yet so much remained the same. Paul must continue to suffer from human weakness and ambivalence. Nonetheless, he will keep the splendor of God in his heart, in the midst of and despite weakness. Paul lists all of these things here: *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed."*

Sometimes we also desire to see God and Jesus more directly in our lives. For Paul, this was often not the case. On the road to Damascus, he had direct contact with Jesus, that's true. But afterwards, he had to rely on the words of Jesus and always recognize that weakness is a characteristic of the church in general: *"always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."* Amen.