

Sermon on 20th Sunday after Trinity 2. Corinthians 3,3-9

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. ⁴Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ⁷Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!

One night when I was travelling with my family, we were all hungry so we decided to stop in Düsseldorf to find something to eat. However, it was already late at night and finding a snack bar in Düsseldorf at that hour was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The whole family was upset because we couldn't even find a simple pizza shop. Eventually however we did find a tiny little Pizza shop that was still open. We rushed in with all our family. Inside we met an Indian man who was persevering to serve the many hungry passers-by all by himself. I felt sorry for him because he had to deal with so many customers on his own. So I asked him when the shop actually closed. His answer: "We are open all ze time!" and then: "Ze whole night long". Then a quiet voice from a small corner of the shop joined in: "And ze whole day long too". It turned out that two men were running the business around the clock. An amazing feat! We stood outside with many other hungry passers-by and complained that there seemed to be no snack bar in the whole of Düsseldorf that was still open after 10 p.m. But here were two men who were tirelessly fighting against the hunger of the whole city. They were preparing pizzas all day and all night long! This story reminded me of God's tireless work on us humans. Yes, God's "shop" is always open. When it comes to the suffering of people in this world and all those who do not yet know the gospel, we can be sure: God never sleeps and his "shop" is open 24 hours a day. For many generations, God has given us churches in which we can celebrate his son and worship Him. The Bible can be read all over the world and in many countries the Bible is read under life-threatening conditions. But the sad thing is that many people no longer perceive this tireless commitment of God or have forgotten that this place - the church - even exists. They also do not know that God can and wants to satisfy their deepest hunger. Instead, many have come to terms with the fact that there is no God, or at least no one who has anything to do with their personal lives or has something to say to them. Not even in their dreams would they think that God can and wants to take care of their very personal needs. As wonderful as God's endless work on us humans is, it is just as sad that we Christians also forget this again and again. Because we no longer recognize God's actions, we are like the person who stands in the pizza shop and complains that there are no pizzas, even though they are being prepared right in front of his eyes. We only see the other pizza eaters who are standing in front of the counter and are hungry, and we start to moan and complain - like in any club or association. In the church, people often complain about the pastor, the church council, the bishop, the church leadership and also complain about the many people who no longer go to church. Or they complain about the hopeless situation of the church in general. The list of criticisms seems endless... And outside

the church, people complain that the church has nothing to offer, that it wastes the money of the poor and that its representatives are out of touch with the world. However, this complaining about the church is nothing new. Interestingly, all of this was already happening in Paul's time. At that time, there seemed to be different groups within the church, each respectively following Peter, Apollos or Paul. The Corinthians were particularly critical of Paul and complained about him and his supposed mistakes. Paul therefore had to defend his apostleship and explained this in the context of the "law of the spirit" and the "law of the letter". Those who follow the "law of the letter" seek salvation, piety, role models and other good things from people. However, anyone who sees the human representatives of the gospel as its embodiment and does not recognize the author behind it will inevitably be disappointed. Because the mistakes of these people then loom large and become the criterion on the basis of which one decides whether to attend a certain church or go to another one or leave the church completely. Neither Paul, nor Apollo, nor Peter, with all their mistakes, are the sole embodiment of the church. And yet it is precisely these human representatives - like the apostle Paul, with all their mistakes and weaknesses - through whom God's word comes to us humans. Interestingly, Paul does not legitimize his office in 2 Corinthians through his extraordinary calling on the road to Damascus. Instead, he takes a completely different path: He begins with the church and says the remarkable sentence: "You yourselves are my certificate of confirmation." And then: "You are the letter of Christ!"

The church is the letter of Christ. Where there is a letter, there must also be an author. So the apostle Paul starts at the very top: God himself writes a letter personally. Not a text message, not a phone call, and not an impersonal email that is sent to many people. No, God writes a personal letter. If I can imagine it this way, I see God in heaven sending the angels out to play because he wants to write an important letter. However, this letter is not of the usual kind - not in an envelope with a stamp, so that the postman would be amazed: "Sender: God?" No, our almighty God, in his infinite wisdom, has done much better. His Holy Spirit is the personal imprint, and this letter is not written with ink on paper. The living Spirit of God is written by God's own hand directly into our hearts. How wonderfully God has done this! This happened through baptism. And another miracle: God allows people to be his postmen - like Paul, Peter and the other apostles. After them came many others, including ordinary pastors, who also have their faults. But the author is always the same: God, who writes a very personal letter to you and me. This letter from God is not like the letter from a dear, deceased relative that will one day gather dust in the living room. No, God writes what is important directly into our hearts. His personal handwriting and signature are immortalized in us. If we keep this in mind, it becomes very clear who we are and what we should be. Then we no longer have to complain about everything that is missing in the church. Yes, we can even live with some mistakes because we know that the message that God has written in our hearts is in no way compromised by them.

If God's handwriting is written in our hearts, that of course also means that this letter should be read - by everyone we know. From the children who grow up on the streets without proper care, to the fundamentalist Islamist who does not believe in God's grace and his Son. We are a letter to all of them. No one is excluded. Even if I am not a missionary sent to Africa or anywhere else, I am still a letter. And through my baptism, my whole life is marked with the word "Sender: God." Because we are all baptized in his name, and on this occasion God has personally written the Holy Spirit on our hearts. This letter can be read in as many ways as we human beings are different. The newborn who is baptized is a letter, as is the disabled, the sick or the elderly. We are all sent by God to be read. And because this letter comes directly from God and is written with the Holy Spirit, it is so. If we are God's personal letters in this way, people will be able to recognize his handwriting everywhere - both when we are joyfull with the joyfull as well as when we cry with the sad.

Paul is not defending himself in this passage. He simply invites us to be what we are: a letter from Christ. In other words, he asks us not to stand outside the "store" and complain, but to step behind the counter and help to satisfy the great hunger in the world. That is exactly what God wants. We do not know why there is so much suffering. We do not know why there is war. And we do not know why people do not believe. We do not know how we could change all these things. Maybe we should not. God wants only one thing from us: Stand where I am - behind the counter. Remain in me and in the precious blood of my Son. Remain in him by simply coming regularly. Come here first, says God. I will explain everything else to you later.

Amen.