

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Choral Eucharist, Sunday 1 October 2017

Sermon preached by **Dr Kathrin Oxen**, Director of Wittenberg's Zentrum für evangelische Predigtkultur (Centre for contextual preaching) and Lutheran pastor in Bützow, Germany.

At the castle

A man in a cell. Rain lashes against the window panes. The wind whistles around the high walls of the castle. He is safe here, but also trapped. It is the autumn of 1521. The world keeps turning and he is sitting here at his writing desk. Sometimes, he feels restless and fearful, especially in the long stormy autumn nights. What will become of him?

He uses the time he has. He undertakes a huge work. He is translating the New Testament from Greek into German. This comes easily to him. And he is translating these lines from a short letter of Paul to the Christian community of Philippi. Paul writes:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, so now, not only in my presence, but much now more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

After he has written this, he puts the quill back in the inkpot. For a moment, he looks at the lines. Saint Paul had written them, a long time ago. But they could be his words, today.

A man down on the ground. Paul had also been struck by lightning and torn out of the life he was living. The same thing has happened now to him. His father never understood why he gave everything up to become a monk, with his excellent education. The promise he made in a thunderstorm, in fear of death, does not mean anything.

And Paul was accused, like him. He was arrested and stood trial, in Rome.

Paul wrote these lines in prison, while he was awaiting trial. There he sat in a cell and did not know what will become of him. Certainly he knew the nights that seemed never to come to an end. These nights, when you are tossing and turning around on your pillow and ask yourself: Did I do the right thing? Or am I wrong?

Paul could reach his friends only with his letters, too. Like him, many letters go from this castle through the country. Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi. He is writing to his friend, Philipp in Wittenberg and to many others. *Therefore, my beloved...* That is how his letters often begin.

Yes, he knows everything. Being down on the ground and accused and trapped in a cell, connected to other people only with words on thin paper. He recognizes himself. And at first, he knows the fear and the trembling. It is his fear. When he lied on the ground in the thunderstorm near Stotternheim and felt the rain running down his neck, the fear got under his skin. And it stayed there, for years.

What's that with God and me? Can I persist in God's severe view, can I satisfy his demands? That tortured him, in the cell in the monastery and sitting over his books. As if there were another father behind his own father, a harder and more demanding father. „You shall“ is what this God always says, but he does not hear the „I can not“.

And therefore he tried to obey this „You shall“. With prayers during the night, with fasting for weeks, with reading and studying, with his whole life as a monk. But the fear was still in his neck and under his skin. Is that enough to make God gracious towards me? And will there be a time where I will be sure about that?

It was Paul who took away his fear. A man like him, on the ground, accused, in a cell.

Paul wrote: *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*

Just words on thin paper. He read them again and again. And in one moment, he felt like these words were written just for him. They translated themselves into his life. And he understood: There is nothing to throw you on the ground. Nobody accuses you. There is no cell. You are free. Believe in that.

And the fear vanished that crept under his skin and was in his neck. And instead of this fear there was freedom. First of all, just inside him. But he was so filled with this freedom that it found its way to the outside. The freedom was written down by him and spoken out. Later, they call it the doctrine of justification. And they started to find a place and a date to

celebrate his discovery. And it became October 31 and it became the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

And it is today and it is here. Being down on the ground, accused, like in a cell - life feels like that sometimes and everything that is in life, its duties and its pleasures. Is that everything, is that enough, can I be sure some day? Am I good enough, loved, respected, beautiful and smart enough? A prison made out of the fear not to be enough. Sometimes I feel captured in it.

And I hear them saying: What about that gracious God, there is no God, no one believes that any longer. That makes it even worse. Then I lay on the ground, stand trial, prisoned in a cell all by myself.

I wish someone comes, saying: There is nothing that throws you on the ground. There is no trial. No cell. You are free.

But there was one who had told us that again. I can see him, on a dizzy morning at the end of October, the town grey and wrapped into the fog from the river banks, the cobblestones wet. He is walking fast, he has to make sure the thin paper does not become soaked. The way through the town from the university to the castle church takes a quarter of an hour. Enough time to think about what he is going to do. As he gets closer to the Castle Church, so his heart beats faster. Not only from walking quickly. The door as usual is full of papers, theses, announcements, some already torn and illegible. He takes them away to get space for the sheets he brought. Some of the nails he can use again. His hand trembles a little bit, when he drives in the nails. When he has finished, he looks at the sheets again. He wrote:

“Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place.” And he continued: “Imperfect piety or love on the part of the dying person necessarily brings with it great fear (...) This fear or horror is sufficient in itself, to say nothing of other things, to constitute the penalty of purgatory.”

A prison of fear and trembling. Not even death finishes that. But he says: This is over. In death, but much more in life. That is what he said with his theses he nailed on the door of the castle church. That is his thesis behind the theses: There is nothing that throws you on the ground. There is no trial. No cell. You are free. Believe in that.

Just words on thin paper, illegible in some days at the door of the Castle Church. But they are written in our hearts, these words, at that time for him, today for me, tomorrow, always.

At that time, on the castle, he stood back to look over the lines: *Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*

Fear and trembling – if he had a little bit more time for the translation, he would like to think it over. This sounds too much like on the ground, waiting for the trial, in a cell.

But he thinks of that differently. The fear changed its place. It is no longer moving him. It is just a consequence of freedom, a side effect of faith.

Fear and trembling, that was the beating of his heart nailing his theses at the door. That was the shiver down his spine when he stands trial in front of the emperor. And it is this uncertainty here in his cell at the castle. He feels that, but it does not creep into him. Because freedom lives there, not fear. So he can live with this fear and trembling. He has no fear. But he wants to be moderate and humble, uncertain and full of doubts. Did I do the right thing? Or am I wrong? These are the questions only the really free people ask.

Martin Luther looks over the lines. And then he takes the quill out of the inkpot and underlines the last sentence: *for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

And then he steps to the window and looks out. The land lies there, wide and open, up to the horizon.

Amen.