Sermon in the Service of the Meissen Commission on May 4, 2013, at the Protestant Kirchentag in Hamburg

Text: Psalm 119, 105: “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Dear congregation,

You do not really notice it when you are only in Hamburg for a short time—we are not far from the North Sea. The North Sea (“Nordsee”) is sometimes called Murder See (“Mordsee”). It can be very dangerous in storms and bad weather. Many have perished in it, many ships have not reached their destination, for example Hamburg harbour, because no light shone for them. At some time people at the coast have understood how important it is to show ways, to mark shallows, to describe the coast line and to indicate the entrance to the harbours. They have built lighthouses. They show at night where to go. With the help of their light, we should find our way. On one of my old sea charts even church steeples are noted as points of orientation for the seamen. But I do not want to tell too much about lighthouses, navigational signs and flashing lights, although I would enjoy doing it, but only want to name the towers in Blankenese, the lighthouse of Neuwerk and Seemannshöfft at the entrance to Hamburg harbour. Seamen knew and know: if I orientate myself by them, I am on the right course, I will then reach the harbour.

But what happens if a signal light loses its brightness, if the light goes out? Or even worse, if evil lighthouse keepers send out wrong signals, if they mislead, if they make ships run aground, if they lure ships on a rock or a sandbank to plunder them? If the signal light becomes a will-o’-the-wisp, then all those who have put their trust on it will get lost.

That is not only true at sea, but also in all other areas of life. We need lighthouses, personally as well as for being together as churches.

“I want to be a lighthouse in the night and wind for cod and smelt, for every boat – and I am myself a ship in need.” The poet Wolfgang Borchert, this exemplary figure of a generation broken in the war, formulated this. He was 26 years old when he died in 1947. He wanted to be a lighthouse and guide people along the cliffs at which his own life had run aground: the madness of war and dictatorship. He wanted to show other horizons. But he did not see himself live up to this demand, he saw himself as a broken ship, as a boat run aground because of the cliffs of life: “… and I am myself a ship in need.”

To be able to be a lighthouse, that must be a wonderful task of life. To show ways to other people, to open other people’s eyes, to take their hand and accompany them for a while, not to leave them alone.

A song of the Kirchentag in Hamburg in 1981 describes this deeply human longing:

Encourage the fearful.
Do not only say: “Be not afraid”.
Go with them for a while,
Put them your hand on their shoulder.
Encourage the fearful.

Stand for the fearful.
Do not only say: “Be not afraid”.
Open your mouth for them,
help them and yourself to defend yourself.
Encourage the fearful.

Take the fearful with you.
Do not only say: “Be not afraid”.
Give them a roof for the night,
give them company in the morning.
Encourage the fearful.

Encourage the fearful.
Do not only say: “Be not afraid”.
Stand at their side and try
to live peace with them.
To live peace with them.

“…two lines are constantly repeated: “Do not only say: ‘Be not afraid’” and “Encourage the fearful.” These are also the main statements of the song: Talking alone does not help, important is the encouragement.”¹

A realistic description of the situation. We want to be a lighthouse but need ourselves that somebody tells us: “Be not afraid.”

Therefore it is good that we, being together ecumenically as English and German, Anglicans and Protestants, again and again refer to him who is
the foundation of our faith. It is good that we search together what is in accordance with Christ.

And it is worthwhile not to lose sight of the self-confident Peter, the rock, the reliable, and to look for orientation and direction from him. When he plans great things in the storm of life, when he leaves the ship of the congregation and wants to live his faith alone without the community with other Christians, then he begins to sink. The dangers which threaten him become too powerful. The storm, the bad weather is too strong, so that he cannot maintain his course with his own force. In the story of the stilling of the storm it is said not without reason: when he realized the waves and the storm around him, he became afraid and lost the already unstable ground under his feet. Because he has left the community of the others and especially because he has lost sight of Jesus, he becomes overwhelmed by the powers surrounding him and their legitimacies. Jesus has to reach out for him. Only by this way he can return, he can continue to live. By this experience, Peter has become a lighthouse for many others. Not because he has started his task with great self-confidence, but because he was confronted with his own weakness.

Obviously being a lighthouse does not exclude being a ship in need. Obviously both possibilities are within us, sometimes even developed at the same time. I am thinking of a sick person. Looking from the outside, it is a human life in greatest need and many who visited him came with fearful hearts and the good purpose to comfort him, but then they went away, themselves uplifted by him. Physically broken, also sometimes in deepest desperation, but then now and again a lighthouse, a man of hope and confidence. And only now when I see these possibilities of human life before me, I want to direct our thoughts on a verse of the psalms: Psalm 119, 105: “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

The word of God is the lighthouse in a dark night and on a bright day. Even on a bright day the ship near the coast needs the tower, therefore everyone has a different painting, so one can distinguish them. On bright days and in a dark night, the word of God is essential orientation.

It is actually always there. Not obtrusive, but inviting. The same way as Jesus has brought the gospel of God’s love to his people in this world, not obtrusively, but inviting, promoting, persuading. Surely, we also find strong words in the New Testaments: “Do not put your lights under a bushel”, that means: let the other people participate in your faith. “You are the city on the mountain”, that means, already from far away when one comes from the plain, one can get orientation from the city. “You are the light of the world!” That sounds like: You have to be lighthouses. It probably means: Faith that does not shine towards outside is basically nothing else than a lighthouse on any dyke which is turned off, which does no longer send out light, whose paint has even been taken away. One does not need it any longer, at most as decoration for the landscape. But this light towards outside, this being a “city on the mountain and light in the world” is only possible when there is a connection to a bigger source of light. Not from our own power, but in the power of God, from the recognition of Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore the person praying psalm 25 is so right: “Make me to know thy ways, o Lord; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me, for thou art the God of my salvation; for thee I wait all day long.” (Psalm 25, 4.5)

Therefore it is valid today: We can be lighthouses in night and wind – despite everything, for people who need us, although we ourselves are ships in need; but only because Jesus himself is the light of the world. The belief in him binds us together and his peace which he gives us makes us able to work for peace and reconciliation which is even 68 years after the Great War still necessary and which can develop its strength in the present crisis specifically in the partnership between churches. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe has stated this last year in its Assembly in Florence: “Just in this time church partnerships and ecumenical cooperation have their very specific value for working and living together in Europe, for understanding and solidarity in the midst of crisis. The challenges of the 21st century – like globalisation, climate change, demographic change, changes in the world economy, the processes of political transformation in the neighbour regions of Europe – demand a free and united Europe whose willingness to solidarity does not end at the borders of individual states but goes beyond the borders of Europe.”

I am thankful that we in the community of Meissen are on the way of Christ, that we stay together on this way and that we let us be invited together to the celebration of the Eucharist. This still cannot be taken for granted but is for us a visible sign of the blessing of God.

Amen.

Translation: Christa Hunzinger

1 Quoted (in German) from: http://www.crossover-agm.de/txtpaul.htm