

Sermon on Jer 31/ Luk 22 „New Covenant“

Toronto United Mennonite Church

By Michael Stahl

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Die Gnade Gottes, die Liebe Christi und die Gemeinschaft des Heiligen Geistes sei mit euch allen!

Dear sisters and brothers!

As a visitor of your congregation during a three months sabbatical here in Toronto I got very much impressed how seriously you take lent as a time of spiritual preparation for Easter. It is expressed by the sound of the bowl introducing the silence as well as the “Lenten Call to prayer” expressing our desire for God to fill our empty bodies and souls with his strength, love and light.

I am very thankful for sharing this experience as a guest among you, looking forward to Easter morning.

Fortunately, lent is a very ecumenical experience binding Christians worldwide together in praying and meditating on Christ’s suffering and thus gaining new strength and faith for our lives. This is also very common in my home country Germany. To help people to get a deeper understanding of lent my church office some years ago launched a nationwide campaign with the claim “Sieben Wochen ohne”. “Seven weeks without”.

From year to year we invite a broader public to consider whether they could go along “without” something for the seven weeks until Easter,

without something they enjoy the rest of the year:

seven weeks without icecream, seven weeks without chocolate,

without the glass of red wine in the evening,

without television or even the internet,

without the smaller or bigger habits of everyday life.

The idea has become very popular even among those who do not attend church. You might perhaps wonder whether this approach is serious enough to meet the deep theological significance of lent.

In fact, it is a starting point:

Many participants of “Sieben Wochen ohne” become more aware and sensitive to their own life if they refuse a particular thing or habit for a certain time.

Such fasting helps to discern our necessary needs and desires: It helps to perceive the inner bondages restricting us.

It helps to understand what is determining our life.

Thus, people will start to think about what is really important and necessary to sustain their life and what they could perhaps take away. Many discover that is quite worthy and healthy to change their habits and just live a simpler life style.

“Sieben Wochen ohne” in this sense is also raising awareness of how much our life is depending on a consumeristic life style leading to poverty and injustice in the poor countries and damaging the climate irrevocably. Even more “Sieben Wochen ohne” is calling for a change to a different, sustainable way of life. It is inviting us to leave the old, hazardous life patterns and enter into a new relationship and refreshed bondage of love, justice and peace. It is about renewing our life and walking on a new ecological balanced foothpath.

This is what also today´s reading in Jeremia 31 is implying when it is announcing a New Covenant. *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Juda.* The whole book of Jeremia is about the threatening destruction of Jerusalem in the year 587 BC which Jeremia had foreseen and warned his people of. Jeremia as a political analyst of his time had clearly discerned the upcoming mischief of his people. He sees it as a result of them being disobedient to the holy law and thus stepping out of God´s covenant with Abraham and Moses. Nevertheless, Jeremia as a prophet had never given up the hope on God´s covenant. Chapters 30 to 33 are at all a word of hope about healing and redemption, in particular chapter 32 which tells the narrative of Jeremia purchasing a piece of land in his hometown Anathoth – although already defeat and exile shaped his situation.

Jeremia had hope in a situation of no hope. And he expresses it by speaking of a new covenant to be expected by God. It is the only reference to a “new covenant” in the Old Testament. Though there are other prophets using language and images of a certain newness as well, it is just Jeremia who speaks of a “new” covenant.

We have to become aware at this point that the term of the “new covenant” which we like to refer to Jesus Christ is at the first place mentioned by the Hebrew Bible and by Jewish authors. The new covenant is by no means replacing the original covenant. Rather it is resuming and refreshing the covenant of Noah, Abraham and Mose, it is calling the meaning of the thora to the people’s mind and particular heart. As Jeremia is saying: *This is the covenant that I will make: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; I shall be their God; and they shall be my people.*”

God promises a new kind of obedience to the covenant stipulations. God will affect the human heart as an emotional act so that people can keep the requirements. Means: the history of constant disobedience of people through sin and trespass does not mean the end of God’s love. No, on the contrary, God extends his love to the sinners, he effects minds and hearts of the people so that they will obey.

At this point a new quality of the relationship between God and humans does emerge: the forgiveness of sin. God, who is known as the one to call his people into a mutual covenant that is to say to listen to and follow the commandments as an expression of one's love to him, he is now saying: *I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.* While the first covenant had been focusing on God relating to the faithfulness and obedience of his people, the new covenant expresses that God's love is not conditioning obedience to the law, in so far God's love is strong enough to forgive trespassing and sin. God in his sovereign power to love keeps the covenant even though humans may fail to do so.

Again, dear brothers and sisters, this understanding of God's unconditioned love is already outlined in what we like to call the "old" Testament. To understand what Jesus had been referred to when speaking of a "new testament" at the last supper, you have to see it from the background of what is written in Jeremia. Jesus, as a faithful Jew, invited his friends to follow the Jewish tradition of the festival of the Unleavened Bread, the Passover, remembering Israel's exodus from the slavery in Egypt, God setting his people free and promising them the new holy land.

The annual celebration of the Passover till today has been helping to maintain Jewish identity. And so Jesus at his time did what his tradition supposed a faithful follower of the covenant to do:

to prepare for the Passover meal. This is what Jesus according to Luke 22 is asking his disciples Peter and John to do: to provide for unleavened bread as well as a Passover lamb to be eaten. In the first century, when Luke wrote his gospel, the Passover lambs were slaughtered in the Temple forecourt and then roasted and eaten in private homes. Thus, Jesus is quite following the tradition when demanding his disciples to follow a man carrying a jar of water into the house for the Passover.

That Jesus last supper coincided with the Passover can also be seen from the fact that the biblical verses correspond to the ceremony of the Passover.

Thus, the last supper of Jesus with his disciples could have started with a word of dedication and blessing Jesus spoke over a first cup of wine, then serving a preliminary dish of green and bitter herbs in a sauce made of fruit puree.

Then, the actual Passover liturgy is following starting with the grace Jesus spoke over the unleavened bread, ending with the grace he spoke over the wine.

In my Lutheran German congregation on “Gründonnerstag”, Thursday before Easter, we are used to take up some of these Jewish Passover traditions and share a simple meal together when remembering the last supper and celebrating the holy communion. We do so to become aware how the last supper is connected to the Jewish Passover and cannot be separated from it.

In fact, Jesus, as he was anxiously foreseeing his arrest and torture by the Roman authorities, found deep hope in his Jewish tradition and the Passover liturgy in particular. And he will have felt encouraged by Jeremia prophesying a new covenant. He might even have quoted these verses on the occasion of celebrating the last Passover with his disciples. I guess it had more been his disciples and biblical authors like in particular St. Paul who in retrospect understood this last supper as a very symbolical one when they quoted Jesus with the words: *This is my body, given to you. This cup poured out is the new covenant in my blood.* Thus they interpreted the Body of Christ as a sacramental presence of Christ among us, expressing the new covenant of God's unconditioned love and forgiveness through the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Our understanding of Jesus Christ as the new covenant of God's love is deeply rooted in Jewish traditions.

The new covenant in Jesus Christ is not replacing God's first covenant with his people, but refreshing and renewing it as already indicated by Jeremia. The new covenant as expressed by the sacrament of the Holy Communion expresses God's will to keep the covenant on any condition, even if we fail to respond to the covenant by not being faithful and obedient.

As Christians we believe that through Jesus Christ, through his suffering and death, God himself is carrying the consequences of human sin and failure, thus expressing radical love which overcomes hatred and violence. In Jesus Christ as the new covenant God reveals himself as the unconditioned power of love which now may encourage us to care about love and peace in our world and change life. Could mean to deliver ourselves from the many bondages of life and rely on the love bondage God provides for us in Jesus Christ through bread and wine. Seven weeks and even more.

To conclude, dear sisters and brothers, let me illustrate this by a modern art work. In Germany we this year commemorate Lucas Cranach, the most famous artist of the reformation era who had portrayed Martin Luther and many other protestant reformers in the 16.Century. In 1515 Lucas Cranch, the younger, was born. On the occasion of the 500. anniversary I asked Jörgen Habedank, a modern North German artist, to create some new art works to interpret Cranach.

One of the works you can see on the screen/ on the print out. Just take some time to meditate on this, to enjoy the emotional coloring. It shows the painting of the Last Supper Cranach submitted for the altar of the city church of Wittenberg.

You see the disciples sitting around a table together with Jesus. In Cranach's painting it is Martin Luther sitting on a table together with other reformers as well as Cranach as the cup bearer.

Thus, Cranach tried to refer the last supper to the people of his time. In the original painting you see a Passover lamb on the table.

The modern artist now has replaced the lamb by a "plate of light". And you may have realized the light bows spanning on the right and left of the painting. They have the notion of the new covenant holding mankind within a blessing out of light. The artist adds knife and fork to the scene and a glass out of light, symbols of modern life today. What is the meaning of the Holy Communion for people today? Habedank called his painting "supper of light", thus expressing his belief that the Holy Communion can set our life into a new light. It may enlighten us in the sense that God through Jesus Christ places our lives into the light of unconditioned love, set us free to love our neighbors and engage ourselves for a peaceful and just world. As Jesus Christ said: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* In this respect, let us open our hearts and minds for the upcoming light of the Easter morning, expecting the one supposed to be dead to arise to new life, with light and truth. Amen.