



SUNDAY SERMON
MATTHEW 5:17-21

Ursula Silber

Every four weeks my granny would bake her Silesian crumble cake. Then the house smelled of yeast, butter and sugar, and she would pull one baking tray after the other out of the oven. For that is when the displaced persons from Upper Silesia had their prayer service, followed by crumble cake. I still remember well the dialect that my grandparents, my father and the others spoke with one another, the songs and the prayers, the stories about home back then in Upper Silesia. And we children, my brother and I, sat there with them and listened—and ate Silesian crumble cake. In the middle of Westphalia. And between the words and the notes of the songs, even between the crumbles on the cake, the question always shone through: Who are we really? We maintain our memories, our language, our customs—but that's no longer possible without a break like "drheeme" (at home). At the same time, we're building houses here and adapting ourselves. Sometimes more of the one and sometimes more of the other.

I only really understood this struggle for one's own identity, the sometimes harsh words and the tragedy they contained, once I was no longer a child and these meetings had long stopped. The grownups knew: as it had always been, as a matter of course, it is no longer possible, and it will never again be like that. We can't go back there, here we don't really belong. We have to invent ourselves anew. But in so doing, we want to remember and to keep what was good and valuable at home, even if life continues differently. My granny's crumble cake was sweet, but it also tasted a little bitter—after the pain of no longer being at home, after the struggle with the question: Who are we really?

I also hear a very similar pain and struggle around this question between the lines of the text in the Gospel according to Matthew: Who are we really? How can we keep our roots and what carries us? And what are we to do now—with the pain, because we have lost the sense of belonging, but also with the new challenges?

The Christians of the Matthean congregation are Jews as a matter of course. Just like Jesus. They believe in the risen Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. They understand themselves as a messianic group among many within the broad spectrum of Jewish movements and tendencies. It must have been disappointing for the Jesus-people at the time that their enthusiasm and their conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah did not excite everybody in the Jewish community: Why do so many not let themselves be caught up in this? Why can't they or don't they want to see the Messiah in Jesus? What are we doing wrong that it simply doesn't "click"? Those are bitter questions when they themselves are so enthusiastic!

And at some point before very long, it became clear that it couldn't go on like that, together under the same roof. Everybody felt that the differences were getting bigger and bigger and that they had to separate in order to go their own way. That must have been painful on both sides. And it surely didn't happen without harsh words, which is also still mirrored in the Gospel according to Matthew: exclusion from the synagogue and a "ban from entering the house" are now very new and traumatic experiences for these Jesus-disciples! So now they live next to one another, but they no longer speak with one another, especially not about Jesus of Nazareth and what significance he might have. And in the face of this interrupted conversation, the Matthean congregation now sees their way as also proclaiming the good news to "people from the nations"; at the end of their Gospel, their commission to do so is even put into the mouth of the risen Lord! There, among the non-Jewish sympathizers, their enthusiasm is echoed; people come and want to belong. And they gladly open the doors for them. Some in the congregation nevertheless keep to the Jewish rules and customs, as they have always done—and why not? Others see this more loosely and now that brothers and sisters without a Jewish background also belong, they no longer practice the dietary laws and other things, even circumcision, so exactly. And of course that also leads to tensions and conflicts, and ultimately to the question about their own identity: Who are we? Where do we belong? Who belongs to us?

In this situation, the evangelist of the Gospel according to Matthew writes his portrait of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah. He tells how Jesus already from childhood and from the beginning proved to be "God with us", the Immanuel. He tells of encounters with sick people, with people who were marginalized, people without hope, who in Jesus experienced God's love and care. He tells how the rabbi Jesus taught and gave orientation for daily life. And at the beginning of the longest and most important discourse in his Gospel—the Sermon on the Mount—he places a programmatic fundamental declaration spoken by Jesus personally: "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass!" This is the foundation on which everything that follows is to be understood. Really very simple and unambiguous: Jesus did not come to abolish the Torah, to invalidate it or do away with it! On the contrary. It remains valid, sentence for sentence, letter for letter, stroke of a letter for stroke of a letter. Literally. None of it is taken back. The Torah is valid. For everyone in God's people—ultimately for all human beings! For it is not a burden laid upon us by God, but a gift and a promise: If you live according to it, you experience that joy grows on this path and that your heart becomes open (Ps 119:32)! With this confession, the evangelist of the Gospel according to Matthew places himself on the side of the group in his congregation who are faithful to the Torah; for him, it is a misunderstanding to believe that Jesus invalidated all this and that one no longer has to hold to it! For him, the Torah, the prophets, and keeping the whole of Scripture belong to the core of his identity. And also to the core of Jesus, the Christ. He came in order to "fulfil" the Torah. First of all and very simply that means: Jesus fulfils the Torah by keeping it. But the evangelist of the Gospel according to Matthew sees more: In *everything* that Jesus does and how he is, he fulfils the Torah and the Prophets, Scripture. In his view of the little ones and of those who have been made poor, in his healing love and care, in his demonstration of solidarity by giving himself even unto death. And in the fact that God, the Lord of life, raised him from death. That as well and precisely that means for the evangelist of the Gospel according to Matthew "fulfilling the Torah". That is what he believes in.

And what is the challenge of this gospel for us here and now, today, so many years later?

I cannot imagine that the dictates of the moment are that we introduce strict Jewish-rabbinical Torah-observance into Christianity. Jewish and Christian communities have developed over many centuries on different paths, next to one another, against one another, and also independently of one another. In the Christian congregations, the "people of the nations" who don't have any Jewish roots themselves are no longer special cases but rather the normal ones. That cannot be simply turned back now to the situation in which this gospel came into being. So what then?

For me, the first thing is to see and to feel the tragedy and the pain of that time; that the paths separated, irreversibly, and that they brought with them a long and tragic history of entanglement, slander and persecution, for which we today have to take responsibility. That this separation is painful even to this day. And that the consciously Jewish-Christian version of identity as incorporated by the Gospel according to Matthew has been suppressed irretrievably in the Christian Churches. It is visible only in the mirror of this Gospel—but at least it is that.

The second and more important impetus for me is: To take Scripture seriously!

We should beware of thinking that we as Christians know more or less what there is to know about the so-called Old Testament and really stand above it. After all, the Christian Church decided that the Hebrew Bible belongs to its Sacred Scripture, and to this day the Church defends and justifies this decision. Thus, even when we just look at the Bible's table of contents, we as Church "of the nations" are brought back every time to our Jewish roots. All the more so when, like today, the Gospel is proclaimed to us: "Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass ..."

For me as a Christian, the Scriptures that tell of Jesus the Christ also belong to the Christian Tradition—together with the Torah and the prophets and never without them. Taking Scripture seriously could mean over and over again to read and to try to understand—and to live what I have understood, even if it is ever so little. Many people do that—Jews and Christians, diverse groups, and we here in Ohrbeck as well. My vision is: When we thus read Scripture together, when we try to understand, to discover it, to love it, when we try to live it—we let the Torah be valid and we fulfil it, we fill it ever anew with life.

Then we tell one another about our different attempts to build our identity as believing people and as a faith community on the basis of Scripture, with our different languages and dialects, our songs and customs, even with our recipes and the typical taste of the cake our grandmothers used to bake. In this way, the differences could become variety, a richness, which we let one another taste.

Then we can look for ways to express what that can mean very concretely, to live God's teachings, to fill them with life. That can open our eyes and sharpen them to see what is needed today: in every person whom we meet, to see what is special and the light of God; not to be silent when a clear word is important; to contribute by my way of life so that the whole of creation can live and breathe ... You all have your own thoughts and experiences concerning this, I don't have to preach it to you. Filling Scripture with life happens at every moment when we try to live, to speak, to act from the strength of God.

And in so doing, the horizon over us suddenly opens up, over Jews, over Christians, and over our history with one another and way beyond. For in so doing, it's not just about ourselves. It's about the big picture. It's about God's project for a new world in which justice and peace kiss, in which human beings live like brothers and sisters and have a future, and especially the little ones and the marginalized, those who aren't wanted and those who are difficult. To read the Torah, to love it and to fill it with life: Not mainly of all for our own sakes but for the whole world!

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff