



SUNDAY SERMON

Cord Hasselblatt

May the peace of God be with us all, Amen!

Dear Christian-Jewish community,

Today, on the 10th Sunday after Trinity, known as “Israel Sunday”, I as a Protestant minister take as the starting point of my sermon the appointed text of the day, which comes from Chapter 11 of Paul’s letter to the Romans, verses 17 to 24, here [in German] in Martin Luther’s translation:

[Luther’s heading: “A Warning to the heathen Christians about arrogance”]

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap of the root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then: ‘Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.’ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will those, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

The Israel Sunday of the Protestant Church: perhaps it was introduced because the *evangelisch* (German Protestant) tradition orientates itself by adherence to the principle of “sola scriptura” (Scripture alone) – and has thus tended to neglect the significance of the formation of identity via post-Biblical tradition which characterises both the Catholic Church and the Jewish community. The Catholic Church has evidently become more aware of its Biblical and liturgical closeness to Judaism than the Protestant Church and thus is in no need of an extra “Israel Sunday” – because every Sunday is in fact an Israel Sunday ... indeed even today, the 18th Sunday in the liturgical year.

And so, this Protestant “Israel Sunday”: At the outset the day on which the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was commemorated – and thus in many cases the report of Flavius Josephus was read and sermons had the theme: Just as the Temple was destroyed in those days long ago, so it could also happen to our Christian communities in the present – if we fail to repent and follow Christ steadfastly. Within the Protestant community, the destruction of the Temple accordingly became a warning example in support of self-critical reflection focused on Christ. And such a ser-

mon could base itself on today's text: *"Be not proud – but be afraid! If God has not spared the natural branches, he also probably will not spare you either"*.

For some decades now, another understanding of the Israel Sunday has been developing: it becomes a religious and liturgical occasion to shape the relationship between Christians and Jews in fundamentally new ways and to give this change expression before God. For instance, by becoming conscious of the fact that today is the 25th of Tammuz and thus we are now in a close temporal and liturgical relationship with the 9th of Av [Tisha b'Av], indeed, in the middle of the period of preparation for this – in Jewish terms – major event in the calendar; and to re-evaluate this closeness as a closeness having positive content.

Or here, today – and even closer to our text from the Epistle to the Romans: once again to be clear with ourselves, as Protestant and Catholic Christians from the gentile world, that our Lord Jesus Christ was and is [!] a Jew by birth – just as Martin Luther knew – meaning that we in our community today stand at varying distance to Jesus, and we are those who are more distant from him ... This is what Paul expresses in his parables of the cultivated olive tree and the wild olive tree and the branches which are torn out by God and then once again grafted back into the tree.

And yet it seems to me that the message of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans does not go far enough for us – Christians living in the 21st century. To be sure, it insists that God's covenant with Israel remains unbroken, and it breaks out in a great hymn of praise extolling God's unknowable ways – at the end of which the whole of Israel will be saved; and yet it seems to suggest that this will come about by means of a turning towards Christ, that is, the coming of Christ at the end of this world as we know it will change everything ...

On the basis of the needs of the present moment my renewed experiences here over recent days at House Ohrbeck, I wish to add – writing this past Tuesday evening: These annual Weeks are very important to all of us. We are not always able to take part in them. The discussions surrounding "Brexit", Britain's withdrawal from the EU, and the increasing frequency of acts of violence linked to supposedly religious motivations in France and Belgium, and now also Germany, all combine to make me feel that the Jewish-Christian Bible Week is even more precious than in years gone by. Perhaps it's the case that these Weeks are something akin to spiritual oases in the middle of our calendar years. At the very least they are a powerful sign of hope for all of us present here ... and probably also a small sign for the world in which we live ...

I now wish to talk about another small sign which prompted me to engage in some thoughtful reflection recently: Two weeks ago, the Fourth Protestant *Kirchentag* of Spandau took place in Spandau – an event known as "SEKT". It takes place every three years and this year it had as its Biblical motto a verse from the Revelation of John: *"Behold, I have opened a door before you, and no one can close it"*. All Protestant parishes and institutions in Spandau were requested to decorate doors in creative ways and to exhibit these on the central Market Square of Spandau. I had once again invited an interreligious group from Luton – which I've had contact with for ten years already – and this "Luton Council of Faiths" likewise had two doors to display. Altogether seven people from Luton came – amongst them two Muslims and one Hindu – and all in all it added up to a notably intense weekend of interfaith encounter, in which the Mayor of Spandau was also actively involved. Six years ago a Sikh also took part; however, none of the present-day Jewish partners in this project was present. They had fashioned the doors to feature a variety of religious symbols and designs, putting them on the doors laminated in A3-format panels. Furthermore, many intense conversations took place with visitors to the Luton tent on the Spandau Market Square.

After the service on Sunday, which included a stirring sermon by the Provost of Berlin, Christian Staeblein, I found myself pondering: One of my favourite verses from Paul is a verse in the 13th chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the so-called "cantic of love": *"Now we see but a*

poor reflection in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." And since then I have been wondering: does this verse perhaps apply to interreligious dialogue? On the decorative panels on the doors all religious symbols were to be seen, positioned equally alongside each other; we experienced intensive encounter; and in Luton this particular group has worked for over 20 years for a special inner-city cohesion ...

Could it be the case that we will be able to recognise in the World to Come that in reality all routes of human understanding are of equal worthiness in God's eyes – and at the same time enhance his or her honour by virtue of their diversity? Maybe this could be heavenly "heteroglossia"?

Amen!

Translation: James Baaden