

Predigt im Gottesdienst

anlässlich der

Allianztagung

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gehalten von Prof. Dr. Dres. h.c. Christoph Marksches

Sermon on Luke 12,16-21

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The gospel we have just heard for Thanksgiving, which we celebrated last Sunday, my dear brothers and sisters, is at first glance one of those dramatic stories told by Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament.

When we hear mention of the speck of sawdust and a plank in the eye, then not only the hypochondriacs among us shudder involuntarily. We also read there that the dead should bury their dead, prompting us to think a little painfully about the graves of our parents in our local cemetery. There is no doubt about it, Jesus of Nazareth loved to speak in a clear language; moderate, reserved speeches were obviously not his thing. He liked what we would nowadays refer to as clear and direct communication. And he liked to pick examples from everyday life for his words and stories. In his case, everyday life took place in a rural setting, which today is still typical for the countryside surrounding Capernaum, Bethsaida and other small places on the northern banks of the Sea of Galilee.

And the scene that forms the heart of today's sermon, the gospel we just heard, is also in the same vein. It is about a farmer who apparently has good yields and economic success, leading him to do what any farmer would do in the same situation: He thinks about building a bigger barn and imagines what it will be like when he can then sit back, satisfied with what he has achieved. At first glance we can find nothing wrong with this, or with what he then he then says to himself: "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." (Luke 12,19). In all the institutions that come together beneath the eight-pointed cross and in the Alliance of the Orders of St. John and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, there are presumably even more farmers than in many other organizations in society – and as we all know, it is not easy today to be a farmer and when a farmer succeeds in increasing his yields and he has to think about also increasing his storage capacity, then he has certainly earned the right to feel a certain satisfaction. There is nothing to be said against taking some rest, enjoying a glass of something pleasant and being happy about the fact that one has succeeded in coping well with an economically difficult situation. That is why, brothers and sisters, we are even more affected by what then follows the understandable tale of the successful and satisfied farmer. What we hear next is a sentence which, the story tells us, the living God himself says to the successful farmer. A dramatic sentence in which God announces to the satisfied farmer his imminent death: "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' (12,20). And then quite a sinister conclusion is drawn: "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (12,21). In other words: The farmer must die on the evening of his moment of great success and the same fate, the story tells us, will befall anyone who collects riches and is not rich toward God. As I said – it is one of the very dramatic stories told by Jesus, taken straight out of everyday rural life at the Sea of Galilee, and it is oppressive in the clarity with which our Lord and Savior expresses himself.

The year after next, 2017, my dear brothers and sisters, we will be celebrating the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, which radically changed Central Europe's religious landscape. Because of these upcoming festivities, one is repeatedly exposed to attempts to describe what Martin Luther and his friends, but also Johannes Calvin and many other men and women, actually wanted in theological terms. One often hears the term "justification from mercy alone". If we look at our sinister "story of the rich grain farmer", then it reminds me at any rate of one characteristic of Reformatory theology that is often forgotten. Martin Luther once said that the Christian faith in truth ultimately serves to allow us to die with confidence and not be afraid of death. Of course nobody likes talking about death, especially not our own death. And that is why this facet of Reformatory theology is often left out. But today, with the above gospel as our sermon text, we should and must talk about this often suppressed facet of Reformatory theology which, by the way, also influenced Catholic theology in the Late Middle Ages.

Our story calls upon us in a dramatic manner not to suppress the subject of death, and certainly not our own death. Do not let it be subdued by the clamor of everyday life, by our joy about family and our success in life, or by our worries about the economic situation and welfare of our countries in the face of the current refugee crisis. If it had to be, could we confidently return our soul to the hands of God this night, or would we beg him in despair to allow us to just sort out a few more things before we go?

In November – and it will soon be November – we, in Germany and elsewhere, remember our dead. The dead of the great wars of the twentieth century, the relatives and friends who have died over the past year or who have long since passed on. I, too, usually take these days as an opportunity to revive the memory of my own father, and memories of my grandparents and friends who have been gone for many years. But in these weeks and days this year, we can also use the chance, dear sisters and brothers, to remind ourselves of the Parable of the Rich Fool and reflect on our own death. Or, as we like to say in Berlin, "make the acquaintance of our dear Lord". Perhaps even the filling out of a patient decree that will govern how my own death is handled is a good opportunity to think a bit about our own end – the Christian churches in Germany have created a common form for such a patient decree; there are undoubtedly similar forms in the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland.

But when we do think of our own deaths, we should not be sad as we do so. Instead, we should remember that at the end of our earthly travels, Jesus Christ will be awaiting us with outstretched arms, widely outstretched arms, and in a world in which nothing separates us from God any longer; no suffering, no sickness; a world in which we will see everyone whom we have missed here on earth. The Reformation theologians of the sixteenth century conceived of that which I have described with the metaphor of the outstretched arms as the merciful God, the God who accepts us unconditionally in spite of all of the mistakes and shortcomings of our lives. And justifies solely through the faith that God gives us. For free.

Now I understand, dear sisters and brothers, that one is no more able to admonish oneself to believe in this merciful God who will give us new life than one can simply tell oneself to believe in the resurrection of the dead in general, particularly when one is facing doubts. "Just believe in it" – for me, at any rate, this type of self-counsel is about as likely to pull me out of the mire of sorrow and doubt as pulling on the tresses of Baron Münchhausen's wig, an image that will be familiar to many in Germany and perhaps elsewhere. No, my dear sisters and brothers, it is always better, instead of brooding in private, to think of death *together* with other Christians and to remember that our Lord Jesus Christ not only overcame his own death, but also ours, through his resurrection from the dead.

An earnest topic at the beginning of what I hope will be a lively and constructive meeting of the Alliance of the Orders. And it is earnest, to be sure. But, dear sisters and brothers, that is just how it is with Jesus of Nazareth himself. In the Christian church, we do not beat about the bush, but rather communicate openly and directly, sometimes drastically, but always realistically. Death is a part of life; it is a part of our lives. We can learn from Jesus of Nazareth and Martin Luther that it is better, and easier, to live with the reality of death if we

begin to deal with the idea early on. Then one can reply to the person who, when someone is at the pinnacle of their greatest economic success, tells them that in the end everyone will die anyway and it will all have been for nought. Yes, I know that I will die one day. But I am glad that one day I will be able to give all that I have amassed in my life to my children and grandchildren, and I am delighted at the thought of how much joy it will give them. Amen.

And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.