

Joh 17,20 “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.”

Dear Thomas, at long last, after a good number of years your training as a missionary has come to a point, that you are installed to work in this congregation. Your grandfather has probably reminded you already that your studies and your successful exams basically just show, that you are able to study, and do not signify an end to your studies. But possibly you are also feeling a bit like the retired missionary Kurt Günther Tiedemann who apparently thought at the end of his official studies, please just show me some heathens so that I can start working.

The fact that it has taken so long, basically just makes its obvious, that our church and mission really takes this calling serious. The responsibility of witnessing to others in the public ministry through word and sacrament should not be taken lightly. And you have experienced at your ordination in Leipzig and here at the installation that many people are keen to support you in your role. That is a great blessing for your future work.

Obviously you are not left on your own when you embark on this ministry. As you solemnly promised at your ordination a few weeks ago, you would abide by teachings of the Holy Scripture and the confessions of the Lutheran Church, and even as you now accept this call into this congregation you still further agree to abide by the rules and regulations of the FELSISA and this congregation. All these are not meant to limit us in a negative sense, but rather give us the parameters for fruitful work in the church of our Lord, and you would do well, to see them as supporting you in your work.

The biggest supporter is actually your Lord and Savior himself. He who has called you into his service, wants to support you. And in the verse I read from his high priestly prayer, he actually prays for you, as one who believes in him through the word of the apostles and as one who now is called to publicly proclaim the very same word of the apostles the word of God himself, Jesus

Christ, so that others through your proclamation will come to faith in their Lord Jesus Christ. That is amazing.

Trying to fathom the depth of the high priestly prayer in any one sermon would be impossible let alone in a short address like this one is supposed to be. Just let me draw out a few lines. You again would do well to follow your Lord and savior's example to seek refuge and guidance in prayer, as we see him right at the end of his ministry and life spending time praying. Assuming that our Lord knew exactly what he was to do, it might be even more significant that he nevertheless always commits his ministry to his father in prayer. In Acts 6,4 we are reminded, that the apostles had learnt to focus on the right things, when they suggested that the people elect deacons to help serve the people, so that they could dedicate their time to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Standing at the beginning of your ministry you might have a very clear picture of what you want to do and want to achieve, and as steering committee of this project and as a congregation there are some pretty clearly defined goals and a job description, nevertheless commit your work to the Lord in prayer, because it reveals and reminds you, that you recognize, that he is in control and you and your work are always dependent on him.

At first Jesus prays for himself and his ministry. He then goes on to pray for the disciples. And you could say this is an inward concentration. There is a separation between disciples and the world. Yes you could probably even say there is enmity between the two. But he sends out these very disciples into the world with his word, so that they would proclaim his word, his truth, himself. And it is through God's own plan, that the word of these apostles become part of the Holy Scriptures, it became normative for our faith. In fact it is not only their word, it is actually through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit God's word.

In that peculiar sense, they are unique in the history of the church. Our word as pastors and missionaries is not the same as theirs. All our teaching and ministry has to be measured against their word. And yes we are called to be stewards of

Gods mysteries, and our faithfulness to this calling is measured by the correspondence of our own teachings to the word and teachings of the apostles.

Then the view is extended over all those who believe through the word of the apostles and then includes everyone, so that the whole world would believe that the Father had sent the son. He, Jesus Christ is the foundation on which the church is built. The public ministry, the ministry into which you have been called, is instituted by God with that purpose, as our Augsburg confession clearly states, so that this faith in him could be obtained. Through the means of grace the word and sacrament the Holy Spirit works faith.

All our preparation and studies, all our confessional teaching and rules and regulations in church all feed into this purpose of fulfilling Gods desire that all people would be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We don't change the truth, we don't adapt it to make it a bit more palatable. We proclaim the truth, not arrogantly, as if it came from us, or as if we hoard it like a stolen treasure, but rather like St Peter says, with gentleness and respect we are prepared to give an account of the hope that is within us. Recognizing that God calls people into the fellowship with him, and he basically adds these living bricks into the ever expanding body of Christ the church, we realize that our church is not just a gathering of friends, not a social club or a place of like minded people. The church is the place where God wants to work faith through word and sacrament so that the people would be one, our unity does not come from our conformity to custom or culture, but rather from the truth that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Due to a large extent to our confessional tradition, the major responsibility for overseeing the faithfulness of our proclamation as a congregation lies with you as a pastor. But that in no way implies that the various members of the congregation have no role to play. St Peter speaking to the congregation says: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace". As much as you have a responsibility to people in the congregation, our responsibility is also directed to those outside of our

congregation. We all realize that one challenge is, that very few unbelievers randomly walk into a church to be exposed to the means of grace. This is a challenge for all churches and has led many to rethink strategies on how to expose people to the gospel. Most probably there is no one approach that works all over. But I guess in some ways, you get what you focus on. And it is a challenge to all congregations to honestly answer the question, what are we focusing on. Is outreach a priority? Missionary Gottfried Martens many years ago held a talk at a church rally (Kirchentag) titled, "Do we want to grow?" And ironically he experienced, that his congregation had to admit no, or at least not in that way, that many others would say was how God led that congregation, and he basically had to move out with his migrant ministry amongst former Muslims and this congregation today is celebrating its new start today.

It might be the right decision to start a new congregation at times, it might be opportune to use an existing congregation as a basis to reach out into the community, and that is what we are planning here in Newcastle, but we don't really have the option of just keeping to ourselves.

On Thursday we will be celebrating Ascension day and the gospel reading which in this year is the sermon text, is taken from Lk 24 a central chapter for the gospel of Luke. Christ himself clearly explains to his disciples how he is the center of Scripture, but he adds the mission to all nations through the Holy Spirits power to the reality of the church. We cannot only accept the fact that he is risen, but deny the mission that he has sent us on. Our focus on Christ as the center of the church makes sense only if we understand the centrifugal power of Gods love, that again pushes the church outward to the people beyond its borders.

I pray that our heavenly father will strengthen you and the congregation in Newcastle together with all of us so that we have the courage to transcend the borders and be credible witnesses of Christ love to the people around us.

Amen

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