

I love to sing together with all of you in the service. I love to meditate biblical texts, I expect and I love to listen to a thoughtful and profound sermon that tells me more than I knew already.

I like to quieten with beautiful music. I love silence which allows me to let my mind wander and to meditate my inner images.

I bring before God all of my thoughts, my experience, my concerns, my longing, my fear, when I pray – for myself or together with all of you.

I am very thankful for this place, where people from all over the world can find a home with all their joys and concerns.

I am very thankful for this house, which is a house of community and not of egoism, a house where the conversation is held again and again, that our world is God's creation and that God loves all of his creation and not only us, living here, in and around Munich.

I appreciate an hour of worship, which is very different compared to all the other hours my week is filled with. I enjoy that I am allowed to be here as I am, that I don't have to play a role, that I can calm down. I enjoy being comforted and encouraged. I enjoy having my feelings and experience taken seriously. I enjoy that my hope and my faith are strengthened.

I am happy that no one tries to manipulate me in the service and that I am treated as an adult in dignity. I love to worship even if it is not always exactly as I have just described it.

Do you have a different view? I don't think so. In one of the texts for this Sunday, the prophet Amos talks to the worshipping congregation about exactly this topic. He tells them what God told him to preach:

“Do not give up celebrating and praying, says the Lord. Do not forget to praise and rejoice in your salvation. I have an open ear for your concerns and...”, oh no, sorry. That was the wrong text. The one, which I meant, is from Amos, chapter 5:

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²² Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³ Take away from

me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5: 21-24)

Sisters and Brothers!

Well, that is some rant. Do we have to accept that? We are in a service and not in the game of abusing the congregation.

It feels very uncomfortable.

On the other hand: this is, at least, a text which we will not have forgotten by the end of the service. We don't forget this text quickly. We feel bruised. This text disturbs. This text irritates. This text meets with our opposition. It is a stinger, a thorn. And: It is a bible text! Word of God, like all the other words about love and reconciliation. What shall we do? How shall we handle this bible text?

Let us distance ourselves a little bit. The text itself comes to us from a distance of about 2700 years and it urges us to sit back and contemplate what was going on at this time.

Imagine.

There is a discussion in the conference hall of the government.

Item No 1 of the agenda: How can we stimulate the economy?

Item No 2: How can the economy grow without any barriers?

Item No 3: How can we maximize the profit?

Item No 4: How can we shift the external frontier to extend the trading space and to find new trading partners for our trading companies?

Item No 5: How can we beat down the prices for the agricultural products in order to export more and in order to stimulate the import of luxury goods?

Item No 6: What has to be done to improve the infrastructure, which means: do we have to build new roads and routes of transport to support the trading companies?

Will we have to plan a tax increase to sponsor the open market?

In a closed and intimate session the discussion continues. It is all about strategies how to meet a possible protest or even a rebellion of the rural population.

For it is clear, that scaling down prices for grain and milk, for meat and eggs will lead to a massive reduction of income for the farmers. That has to be accepted and, if necessary, the law concerning the freedom of assembly has to be tightened.

The army will be instructed to be combat-ready and the soldiers, as needed, will be given plenty of rope to meet the protestors.

The lively debate is closed. Everyone is satisfied. The week of meetings closes with the traditional National Prayer Breakfast.

No one expects that one of the two big religious institutions will protest against the political agenda.

They have been involved early enough and their percentage of the national tax income is not too bad.

Didn't we want to distance ourselves a little bit?

What I was talking about does not sound like distance. Although it sounds very familiar, it is first of all a description of the social, political and religious circumstances at about 760 before Christ, the period when Amos lived.

The external frontiers are extended. Taxes increase permanently in order to build new transport routes and to protect them. Israel swaps agricultural products for gold, luxury goods and military equipment. The farmers are urged to produce more and more. The consequences are falling prices.

The trading companies are expanding into the rural areas, destroying structures and traditions. It is all about money. Faking the books, corruption, manipulation of justice has become a daily occurrence. The farmers and their families are sinking into poverty.

The leading class of priests is supporting, even authorizing, this development with corresponding worship. The sanctuary of God has become a servant of policy. The sanctuary of God has become a servant of exploitation by taking taxes at the Harvest Festival. The traditional service in the temple has turned into the center of oppressing the poor. Those who have become rich by exploiting the poor, who are making their profit with the hunger crisis of the farmers and their families, are attending the divine service, singing: "Praise God, from whom all blessings come..."

God listens to them as he listens to everybody, and he answers:

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Let us come closer again, even if we have not been too far away. What does this biting text aim for?

Worship turns into idolatry when it supports, strengthens, assists or keeps quiet about injustice, exploitation and inhuman policy. Prayer and action for justice cannot be divided, as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said. Justification and sanctification cannot be divided, as our Methodist tradition says. Faith and life cannot be divided. Our worship should be reliable, using prayers of intercession for our world and our communities and we should be questioning, contradicting and protesting when worship deviates from this path.

When people are suffering from injustice, when people die because other people do not provide bread for them, when children are betrayed and lose their future and the church of Jesus Christ does not talk about it, does not protest by prayer, sermons, hymns and action then the service has become idolatry.

There is a crack in our world that divides the poor from the rich, the hungry from those who have enough...and this crack in our world has to be visible in the church of Jesus Christ. There is no whole, harmonic, undisturbed and self-glorifying service, as long as there is so much despair in our earth, which gives reason to grieve and to act. A selfish care for our own soul and our private relationship with Jesus is not spiritual at all as long as we don't have an eye for justice at the same time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarized the whole sermon of Amos in 1938 in one sentence: "Only the person who cries out for the Jews may sing *Gregorian chant*."

Where there is nothing but singing and no crying out for others, there is not worship but idolatry.

What was Amos criticizing? There was an absolute standstill. The relationship between God and his people had dried up, had become a business connection, no longer a love attachment. What flowed to them, did not flow on, did not become surplus for the others. You are celebrating, Amos said in his furious speech, but:

You are separating your faith from the world; you are separating your faith from the justice, the hunger, the despair. You are making use of God as if he was a little tin god.

Nevertheless, God does not accept that!

Asking for the reliability of the church and of our own faith we can no longer distance ourselves. Meanwhile we are right in the middle, although the bible text originally did not talk to us today.

What to do now? Which direction shall we take in our learning?

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

These are God's words at the end of the text. That is how his will can be heard. It is not about laws, at least not at first. Justice is an issue of relationship.

The justice of God, which is often talked about in the bible, is that God remains true to his people, that God abides with us, even if we distance ourselves. The justice of God is his reliability. The justice of God means, that he stays around those who have nothing except their hope in Him. Like an ever-flowing stream justice shall roll.

Faithfulness between people shall be like water which creates life and lets deserts bloom and change into a great place to live.

As soon as people look at each other, as soon as people don't lose sight of each other, as soon as people bring along the concerns and the hunger of their neighbors into the Sunday worship, as soon as people accept being touched by others, the authenticity of worship need not be in question. As soon as salvation and welfare are no longer separated, as well as justification and sanctification, as soon as loving is no longer a rose-colored feeling but a merciful hand, authenticity need not be in question.

When we question what is going on in the world, when we show that the church cares about policies that affect people's lives as well as caring for their souls, when we insist that God is the creator of all and everything in the world, we no longer have to worry about Amos' words.

We then love to sing together in the service. We then love to meditate biblical texts, expect and listen to a thoughtful and profound sermon that tells us more than we knew before.

We then like to be quietened by beautiful music. We love silence which allows us to let our mind wander and to meditate on our inner images.

We bring before God all of our thoughts, our experience, our concerns, our longings and our fears, when we pray.

How good to have a place like this, where people from all over the world can find a home with all their joys and concerns.

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We are celebrating an hour of worship, which is very different compared to all the other hours our week is filled with. We enjoy that we are allowed to be here as we are, that we don't have to play a role, that we can calm down. We enjoy being comforted and encouraged and that our hope and faith is strengthened. No one tries to manipulate us. We are treated in dignity.

We listen to God when he talks to us: We are able to change our lives. We are able to live in justice, to organize peace, to resist; we are able to make a difference by following Christ. We are able to work for reconciliation, for a community, which does not exclude others. The horizon of our hope is much wider than the horizon of the so-called open market.

Care for the stream of mercy between you and me, which shall not run dry. Let it overflow from you to others. **²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**