

Our Call

Sermon on Daniel 7 for All Saints' Day

Thus begins chapter 7 of the book of Daniel in the Old Testament:

"In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter."

A dream.

"I have dreamed the night
a really heavy dream,
In my garden
a rosemary tree was growing."

This is a poem by Joachim August Christian Zarnack, a Lutheran preacher and teacher of the Goethe era, to the melody of a folk song.

"I have dreamed the night
a really heavy dream..."

The rosemary tree is a symbol for death. A difficult dream indeed!

There are almost 7,000,000 references to the keywords "dream" and "poem" on the internet for German, about 1,200,000 for Swedish, but for English only 173,000.

Do the Germans have a weakness for dreams and poems?

No, we all dream. Many of our dreams we do not remember. Dreaming is a process of mental repair. And when we experience hard things, we dream heavily. This does not have to go as far as to the rosemary tree. So often we are hurt or hurt others in their soul, and this is enough for a repairing dream. To a certain extent, scientific studies confirm the necessity that Jesus sees the 5th commandment in the Sermon on the Mount so radically: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:21-22)

The "hell of fire" begins in a dream!

Thus we dream, and when we have examined our conscience before going to sleep, and have also thanked God for the beautiful things, for his preservation, etc., during the day passed, when His word in the Scriptures was the last word of the day, then a healing miracle occurs: many a thing is already tidied up and repaired before we fall asleep, and then we dream less. Perhaps even so little that we do not remember anything. Preservation from hell being begun.

But don't be mistaken: Daniel did not dream like this. Daniel makes experiences that we generally don't know. He dreams differently, he has visions. He sees things that go beyond his own experience.

I remember another situation during my university studies of theology, when an obviously non-believing student again and over again tried to formulate his personal problems and disbelief scientifically and by this trick forced us to discuss the matter. Actually he tried to make his problem of belief — or better: unbelief — to be our problem. Did Daniel see something or look in a special way? How could this be according to science??? Is a vision something possible or only phantasy? Soon the whole group including the lecturer was lost in discussion...

Yeah, Daniel wasn't looking as we do. God gave something to him to pass it on. And God did it in a specific way, something we have a term for: vision, even if we lack the experience. And most of us do lack it!

And he who does not believe that there is a God, cannot understand it. So my colleague fell through the cracks: He did not believe and was not willing to open himself to the possibility that there is a God who has different means of how to communicate with us.

In these moments of visions Daniel had, nothing was repaired. But God himself reaches into the life of Daniel. By the way, HE also reaches into our lives, usually not with visions, but by His holy communion. And His word of Scripture.

It was not a romantic reverie, not even something pleasant what happened to Daniel. Throughout the Bible, usually people who encounter God, in whatever way, are afraid and startled. Here too (verse 15): "As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me."

This alone shows that our discussion at the university went in the wrong direction. Even worse: The so-called "terror of God" was even ridiculed...

But here it is different. And the horror of Daniel exceeds the horror we experience. It wasn't some kind of Covid-19 fear. It was also more than the horror in the church in Nice when a Muslim raged with a knife. Or in Lyon recently, when a priest was shot and very badly wounded.

There is nothing at all exceeding Daniel's horror. As God in his greatness and violence cannot be imagined. And this was the reason for Daniel's horror. He stood before God and his actions.

Now modern scoffers would say: "Well, what's the point? Daniel says something and justifies it with the claim that he got it directly from his God."

Yes, they could say this. But they won't get far with that.

I have to explain: Modern so-called theologians claim that the prophetic books of the Old Testament only describe, in reality, in retrospect, what has already happened.

As if I were now writing a Corona prophecy and dating it back to the year 1970. In 1970 I had a vision, and I saw a virus coming over us...

Stupidly — or happily, fantastically, with Daniel you don't get far with it. We don't know exactly when Daniel experienced all this and wrote it down. But in any case it was at least six, if not twenty generations before Jesus. All academic theologians will confirm this.

But of Jesus the prophet speaks: "I saw in this vision by night, and behold, there came one in the clouds of heaven as the Son of Man unto one of old age, and was brought before him." "Old age" is not beautifully translated, but we really have no word for it. It is the opposite of a pejorative: it is an honorary title for a mature, a wise man.

So then we would say, "There came one in the clouds of heaven as the Son of man unto him who is Wisdom, and was brought before him." That sounds better being more correct.

But the prophet Daniel sees more: "He gave him power, glory and kingdom, that all nations, people and tongues should serve him. His power is eternal, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom has no end."

These are words which remind us at the Advent and Christmas season when we hear them, words that describe Jesus.

Thus Isaiah 9: "For unto us a child is born, and a son is given unto us, and the kingdom is upon his shoulder; his name is Wonderful, Counselor, Hero, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

How well does the meaning of the name *Daniel* fit in there: "God (-el) provides justice".

And if the kingdom of him who is like the Son of Man is eternal, if his dominion is eternal, then he too is eternal. But only God is eternal. Thus we see Jesus, the child of Christmas, and the one like the Son of Man here as undivided part of the Holy Trinity. The Man of Wisdom and He are in a dialogue — God is not a monolytic block, a dictator as a closed personality. He knows communication — with us — as he communes in himself: as father and son and — as revealed in other Scripture verses — as holy spirit.

A difficult Bible word that once again blasts our thoughts. A difficult Bible word that once again blows our minds and clearly pushes us to believe in God. To believe a God. To believe the one God, the triune one, the creator, redeemer, the one sanctifying the saints.

But also a glorious Bible word that gives meaning to our lives: Ultimately we are there to serve God, to serve Jesus. And if you understand the meaning of this and live it, you are no longer lost in the meaninglessness and absurdity of the modern world, which is no longer a straight and clear path to go and to live. It is no path at all, but is more reminiscent of a hamster running wheel, a constant and restless hurrying almost without goal, meaningless, breathtaking — absurd.

Now back to Daniel: How could he have made up of all this? Invented what would happen hundreds of years later? How could he have foreseen Jesus, the Messiah...

God had taken him aside. And this was not only for moments of visions. He was taken out of the hamster running wheel. And set on a straight path leading to God.

This is exactly what God wants to do with us: to take us out of the hamster running wheel and set us on a straight path leading to Him.

But then there is something "on top of it"!

We are celebrating All Saints' Day today. By the way: The new fashion of Halloween is not Celtic (that is probably pure fantasy), it is not of old but a recent invention which was not known in Europe before the 1990ies, and the meaning of the word is actually Christian: "Halloween", that is "All hallows' evening" — nobody knows anymore that this means the eve of All Saints' (hallow's) Day; and it refers to the Evensong, the evening church service before All Saints' Day.

It is good that we have got our — Christian — All Saints' Day. We do not want to end in a cult worshipping the saints which were men and women as we. To worship men and women is idolatry — and this ends in misery. We worship God alone. But we remember the saints, remember what God has done in and through them. Already in the New Testament, for example, Jesus says about the Mary who anoints him at Bethany: "Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told *in memory* of her." (Mt 26:13). And when the Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes us we have more than clear pointers: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." (ESV; Hebr 13:7)

Those saints: We meet their icons in orthodox churches, and every kiss on them is a kiss sent to God and not to a human being.

Those saints: They let themselves be sanctified by God. And we must not forget them. They were there — on earth. And they are there — with God: the church in Heaven, in eternity.

Then we start to grasp the words of the Bible verse given for this week: "So now you are no longer guests and strangers, but fellow citizens of the saints and members of God's household." (Eph 2:19)

They belong to us and we, the Christians faithful to God, belong to them, because all of us together are the mystical body of Christ.

And now, only now we can also understand what Daniel says in verse 27:

"But the kingdom, authority and power under the whole heaven shall be given to the holy people of the Most High, whose kingdom is eternal, and all authority shall serve and obey him."

Just as one who was like the Son of Man, i.e. Jesus, has the "power, glory and kingdom", so will those who are his mystical body, the church (kyriake — belonging to the Lord, the kyrios = God) on earth and the saints — the saints themselves — who are thus already in eternity, in God's timelessness, be taken up into this timelessness and they will be given "kingdom, power and authority under the whole heaven".

We will not get new offices, duties, jobs, which we perhaps do not want at all — I cannot imagine such a thing for myself. Here on earth the moment comes to retire from work!

But there in eternity we will get a new being, we who already serve Christ here, a kind of being that we cannot understand, because it is a being in eternity and not in this age and time.

So All Saints' Day speaks of the saints, but it also speaks of us, and it speaks above all of Christ. And that is why, by the way, the liturgical colour today is white.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews (chapter 12) the context is summarised as a reminder:

"Therefore we also, while we have such a cloud of witnesses around us, let us put away our sin, which always sticks to us and makes us sluggish, and let us run by patience in the battle which is decreed for us, and look to Jesus, the beginner and finisher of the faith; who, though he might have joy, endured the cross, and had no regard for shame, and sat down at the right hand on the throne of God."

Let us run! Through this time, through Corona and whatever else may come. To run is important. To run to God. And nowhere else.

Let us look up! On the one who carries and holds us, who shows us the way — to himself.

He who was true man and true God — because only God can sit down "at the right hand of the chair of God.

And because mankind saw Him when he walked at the banks of the river Jordan.

Let us endure — at the end there is not the cross, but there is the resurrection and the ascension to heaven.

Daniel could not deduce any of this from his life experience. He "was very sorrowful in his thoughts, and his form decayed; but he kept the speech in his heart. But he believed and preached."

And indeed — Jesus has come. We have it easier than Daniel, because Jesus showed us the clear way. Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe!

Let us remain faithful to God, keep the words in our hearts, walk the way which God has in stock for us.

All Saints' Day — together with all those who are sanctified by God.

The way which alone leads to our heavenly Father — through all tribulation through all moments when we are sorrowful in our thoughts, when we have to dream heavily because the day was not good. Future in God will be!

Father Fred