

16. November 2020

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus”

Rev 1:1-4;2:1-5

A revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him so that he could tell his servants what is now to take place very soon; he sent his angel to make it known to his servant John, and John has borne witness to the Word of God and to the witness of Jesus Christ, everything that he saw. Blessed is anyone who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed those who hear them, if they treasure the content, because the Time is near.

John, to the seven churches of Asia: grace and peace to you from him who is, who was, and who is to come, from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 'Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus and say, "Here is the message of the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who lives among the seven golden lamp-stands: I know your activities, your hard work and your perseverance. I know you cannot stand wicked people, and how you put to the test those who were self-styled apostles, and found them false. I know too that you have perseverance, and have suffered for my name without growing tired. Nevertheless, I have this complaint to make: you have less love now than formerly. Think where you were before you fell; repent, and behave as you did at first, or else, if you will not repent, I shall come to you and take your lamp-stand from its place.

There is a special promise connected with the words of the Book of Apocalypse, as we hear it today! *“Blessed is anyone who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed those who hear them, if they treasure the content, because the Time is near.”*

The time is near! If this was said so long ago, then this time, in which the story of salvation will find its completion, has come even closer.

Today we hear a word of our Lord to the church in Ephesus; a church in which St. Paul had worked for two years. Some suspect that the Apostle John lived there together with the Virgin Mary! The stay of the Apostle John after he was in Patmos is testified by Eusebius, and John died there during the reign of the Emperor Trajan (between 98 and 117 AD).

We first hear the praise in which the good sides of this church are emphasised! When we read that the word is addressed to the angel of the church - and many exegetes of the text see in it the bishop of the church - it can certainly be generally understood that the Lord describes the state of the church in Ephesus.

The Lord gives praise for good works and many things are mentioned which are worthy of imitation.

We could ask: What is missing in such a church? Why does such a reproach of the Lord come after the praise, so that even in the absence of repentance the lampstand can be moved away?

Some exegetes assume that the church in Ephesus was a special model for the other churches in Asia Minor, that is, it had a kind of spiritual supremacy!

So what could have happened? After the praises in the first part, it can be ruled out that they may have returned to the cult of Artemis, which was customary in Ephesus!

What does “leaving the first love” mean? This is an expression in a German translation that I will use.

With a “first love” we connect the special fire that burns in the heart for another person and can take over everything! In this case the fire for God is meant, perhaps the zeal of the first conversion, the embers of such a love! It is a special light that not only strengthens the will to do good, but everything is permeated by this love and bears witness to this love! An unusual “wakefulness of the heart” is created, which should then lead to a lasting love, which always maintains this wakefulness in us, even if it may get other expressions in the course of the journey!

Important in this context is the term “wakefulness of the heart”, i.e. that the heart is touched in a special way!

Now it can happen that such a “wakefulness of heart”, from which the good works of faith then come (“behave as you did at first”) will diminish over time if love is not cultivated accordingly! All the good works and attitudes that the Lord praises remain, but the special fire of first love no longer glows! The works no longer radiate the special warmth of this love! Perhaps the zeal for the path of holiness has diminished, that zeal which strives daily to grow in love!

A vocation to religious life or priesthood might serve as an example.

The first love so gripped the person called that he was ready to leave everything to follow only the Lord! The embers of this love have warmed and he was ready to overcome all obstacles, to truly leave the world and belong completely to God! One lived in this “first love” at the “height of his call” and thus became a “lamp”!

Along the way, however, one was not vigilant enough and became careless; the path of holiness seemed too arduous. One has become more settled in this worldly life again, given in to the desires of one's human nature, neglected the path of meaningful asceticism, performed prayer only in a dutiful manner and gave space to more and more unimportant things! One has not left the path or even gone astray - one continues to fulfil one's duties - but the heart is no longer properly involved! The splendour of the way fades; the heart loses its glow!

This could be the state that the Lord means; the loss of the dimension of "first love", to which one should return, so that the path of discipleship may regain that splendour and height which is proper to first love! The word of the Lord shows us that this is possible!

In a sincere self-reflection we should therefore prove where our love has perhaps diminished, what we can do to wake up completely again, how we can regain the zeal for the Lord and His Kingdom! This is possible and perhaps we need to “make up for lost time”. Thus today's text becomes an invitation to turn to the Lord with all our hearts and to hold our hearts, which may have become cold, to Him so that He may touch them with the Holy Spirit. The sluggishness and indifference of our heart also needs to be touched by the “fire of love” which is the Holy Spirit.

We see that the Lord, who will come again at the end of time, has His own in mind. It is His love that tells us not only what we do good and correspond to Him, but also what we lack and where we are in danger. But the Lord is not only a Master who shapes us wisely, but also the one who gives us the strength to better respond to His call. It is the Lord and not only a wise man!