

Sharing hope in a hostile world

2 Before Advent (Year B) - 17.11.2024

Daniel 12.1-3 | Psalm 16 | Hebrews 10.11-25 | Mark 13.1-8

Key verses

["Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12.2)]

"Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol or let your faithful one see the Pit." (Psalm 16.9-10)

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)[...]" (Hebrews 10.19-20)

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds [...]" (Hebrews 10.23-24)

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come." (Mark 13.7)

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Sermon

I. My approach: Pastoral theology and the signs of the times

Dear friends in Christ!

Pastoral Theology celebrates its 250th anniversary in Vienna this year. At the request of Empress Maria Theresa, then-Prague Abbot Franz Stephan Rautenstrauch founded this theological subject at the University of Vienna in 1774.¹

Why do I tell you this? - I obtained my doctorate in pastoral theology. That is, so to say, the prism through which I, as a theologian, see the world and theology. So, what kind of perspective do pastoral theologians use?

I'd like to give you a short description: Pastoral theology focuses on the present, analyzing motivations and theologically interpreting them in light of the Gospel. It works with the humanities and social sciences to uncover "signs of the times" in cultural, social, and political discourses. The purpose is to develop action plans for pastoral care and the church in order to make our coexistence more Godly and humane.²

The term "signs of the times" comes directly from chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel.³ Jesus emphasizes here the significance of discerning the signs of the times in order to determine proper courses of action.

Today, I'd like to share a tiny practical theological thinking experiment with you. We begin with a brief glance at the present, evaluate it in light of today's gospel and the other readings, and then try to think about what this may imply in practice for us Christians.

1 Cf. [//pt-ktf.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/i_pt_ktf/3_News_Events/250_Jahre_PT/Folder_250_Jahre_Pastoraltheologie.pdf](https://pt-ktf.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/i_pt_ktf/3_News_Events/250_Jahre_PT/Folder_250_Jahre_Pastoraltheologie.pdf)

2 Cf. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/819380606777428>

3 Cf. Matthew 16:3

II. A question: What moves you, me and the people around us in today's world?

Let's start with the present. What drives you, me, and society today? An excellent way to answer this issue is to read newspapers, watch the news, or listen intently in interactions with people we meet. (By the way, pastoral theologians love reading the newspapers.)

A quick glance at the newspapers reveals the most pressing issues of the day: the outcome of the US elections, coalition negotiations in Austria, the end of the coalition in Germany, war in Israel and Ukraine, urban crime, economic stability or instability, migration and immigration, climate change, the resignation of Archbishop Justin Welby, cases of abuse in the church, the rise of extremist parties around the world, and much more. All of the themes are related in some way by a concern about the future of the world and the church.

People occasionally tell me in talks that we are living in truly bad times. Many describe the present as being in apocalyptic times. In the face of conflict and climate change, the media incites and, in some cases, emphasizes fears of doom.

Young people, particularly those aged 16 to 22, are deeply concerned about the future. When this so-called Generation Z considers the future, they are uneasy.⁴ Studies show that it is precisely those under 30 who look to the future with pessimism.⁵

I'm not sure how you feel about those depictions of the present, but I frequently find a perspective lacking that allows one to live in the present. For this reason, our next step should be to explore today's Bible readings in order to gain a more hopeful perspective.

III. The message of hope: Bad news don't have the last word

Our Bible readings today are related in that they deal with the end of the world or the final judgment on the one hand, but they also offer up a window of hope without ignoring the troubled present.

4 Cf. <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/a/generation-z-ukunftsangst>

5 Cf. <https://www.elektronikpraxis.de/millennials-generation-z-mit-sorge-in-die-zukunft-a-846482/>

Here comes a brief summary of the key aspects of our readings today: [Our reading from the Book of Daniel today discusses the resurrection of the virtuous and the punishment of the wicked in the end times.] Psalm 16 offers confidence that God will not abandon His devoted ones in the world of the dead. The Epistle to the Hebrews expresses optimism that Jesus' death has created a new possibility for eternal fellowship with God. The Gospel of Mark depicts the world, including its conflicts and calamities. Here Jesus suggests that we should not be concerned by it. The evil aspect is part of this planet. But this isn't the end.

So what is our central hope for this world that sustains us as Christians? What does God have in store for this world? What is God's mission?

At the end of times, we all will have to account for our actions. This maybe disturbs us because we know that much in our lives and in this world has not gone well and is not going well. But we hope for a merciful God who stands up for us when it comes to the final judgment. Our hope as Christians is that God has already positively committed Himself to us. The Book of Common Prayer says: "Christ, very God, and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men."⁶

Even though the present sometimes looks bleak, hopeless, and often unbearable (I particularly think of the abuse victims in the church.), we hope that there is a reconciled future with God and His creation. Yes, all the disturbing news reports show us that there is much to be done by us as humans in the present to preserve our Earth as a livable and safe place to live. But all the threats are not yet the end of times. Our hope is that war, cruelty, suffering, and death do not have the final word. In the end, God will reign and put an end to the rule of all life-hostile powers. Our hope is that in the end there will be justice and peace in God's Kingdom.

6 Cf. <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/articles-religion#11>

IV. Your task: Sharing hope through love and good deeds

We come now to the final stage of our pastoral thought experiment. Now I'd want to ask you to consider what our Christian hope might entail for your actions. Therefore, I ask you again to evaluate our Bible readings for today. Above all, the Letter to the Hebrews gives us an indication as to what a proper reply to the signs of the times could be (Hebrews 10.23-24):

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds [...]"

This verse describes the position of a Christian community around the end of the first century. Some Christians were at risk of abandoning religious services. Christian faith appeared to be diminishing. In this situation, the Epistle to the Hebrews encouraged Christians to maintain their faith while also strengthening and encouraging one another. Members should look out for each other and do acts of kindness.

For us today, this can entail asking ourselves what the Christian hope means to us and how we show it through our actions. It is a summons to consider what genuinely inspires us and whether our faith is consistent with our actions. Loving treatment of one another, as well as care for those in need, should be the powerful signs of the hope that motivates us as Christians.

By the way, good deeds not only communicate a positive outlook on life, but they also boost people's self-esteem: studies show, for example, that young people who engage in social activities feel more connected to society and are more likely to participate politically.⁷

V. The vision: A community of hope in a hostile world

However, it is not our responsibility as individual Christians alone to express our Christian hope for a reconciled future with God. This mission also extends to our congregation and the Church in total.

⁷ Cf. <https://idw-online.de/de/news313367>

As a result, everything we do at Christ Church can only serve one purpose: to bear testimony to the hope that sustains us as Christians and, we feel, is vitally relevant to the rest of the world. We are urged to be a hope-filled community in a hostile world.

That is why stewardship campaigns are crucial for reminding us of our mission and challenging us to consider our behavior in light of our hope. How can we put back into service what we have: our time, our talents, or our financial resources?

Finally, we can conclude and summarize our pastoral-theological thought experiment: God's mission in our fallen, damaged world is to offer reconciliation. That is our hope, and therefore it is our mission. And this mission, in particular, entails sharing hope in a challenging present. **Amen.**

Summary

As Christians, we believe that at the end of time, the Kingdom of God will appear, and God will once again live in perfect communion with His creation. Peace and justice will be the rule in God's Kingdom. Jesus represents the beginning of God's kingdom. As a result, we should not be concerned by conflicts or disasters. Despite the troubling news of the present, we have a well-founded faith that God's creation will have a wonderful future because of Jesus' cross and resurrection. This hope might serve as an impetus for good works and the proper management of one's own abilities for Christ Church. It is about understanding the signs of the times in the light of this hope and witness in a hostile world.

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