**Sermon Lk.17, 20-24**

**The Coming of the Kingdom of God**

**20 Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, 21 nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘there it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.” 22 Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. 23 People will tell you, ‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’ Do not go running off after them. 24 For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.**

**Dear Congregation,**

**What can we hope for? This question occupies philosophers, politicians, economic experts and scientist looking into the future. However, isn’t this our question as well? Is the recession behind us? When can we finally leave Iraq? When will the violence in Syria end? Can we still reverse the global warming effect? Is peace between Israel and the Palestine possible? What can we hope for? This question comes up also in a very personal way: What can we hope when facing anxieties around our workplace, worries about marriage and family, health and sickness? When we look at it there is sometimes not much that could assist us with having hope. In our Sermon text for today Jesus is also being asked anxiously: “How long will things go well here in earth? And when does the Kingdom of God finally come? And Jesus gives a totally encouraging and hopeful response. The Kingdom of God, nothing knew it better than him, as this was one of his main themes and concerns. In many of his words and even more in his parables, Jesus is drawing an image of this new reality that he calls “Kingdom of God”. And he says: “Don’t look here and there, don’t follow false Messiahs, for the Kingdom is already here – in the midst of you.”**

**Kingdom of God- what does this mean? In the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples to pray it says: “Your Kingdom come”. This means that Sunday after Sunday we pray that God’s reign will be manifested. That God will be the central power in your and in my life. That there will be signs of God’s love and his grace visible and tangible in this world. In his parables Jesus describes images that give us an impression how God’s reign will be like: He draws images with the happy colors of a celebration, like a wedding or a banquet. Music is part of it and joyful celebrating. There is enough to eat and drink for everybody. Persons with special needs and the homeless are invited to the feast and allowed to sit at the table with the host. Jesus describes in the parable of the workers in the vineyard that the basic principle in this Kingdom will be justice, meaning that everybody gets what everybody needs to live. Nobody will go without. In the sermon on the mountain that we heard last Sunday Jesus shows us the Kingdom of God as peace and solidarity among people. Oppressed are able to breathe again. The sad find comfort and the sorrow filled find new motivation to live. Even former enemies will sit together in peace.**

**Jesus draws an image of the Kingdom of God that are filled with light, happy colors that are inviting and positive. Who would want to stay outside when the feast begins? Who would remain on the side lines when reconciliation and justice start blooming? Who would not want to be there when the Father celebrates the return of his prodigal sons and daughters? Yet always Jesus makes clear: It is a gift to be part of God’s new world. And what a loss for those who remain outside, who miss to hear the invitation because they are too busy or too self-absorbed or proud and won’t allow to be invited. For those persons the experience of God’s kingdom will remain closed.**

**For the invitational call of God is always also connected with the call to change direction: “Repent, go within yourselves and turn away from those paths that don’t lead to God!” To return home to God, to consciously turn away from all evil, that is how God’s Kingdom will begin to manifest in our lives.**

**And so Martin Luther explains in his Small Catechism: “God’s Kingdom will surely come even without our prayers and participation, yet we pray in the “Our Father” that God’s Kingdom might also come to us.”**

**Every Sunday we ask in our church for God’s Kingdom to come, yet we rarely remember that God’s Kingdom will not only come sometime at the end of time, but that God’s reign is already among is, today – we only often don’t recognize it.**

**With God’s Kingdom it is like a fish that does not know that it is water that is all around it and maintains its life. There is a nice story of Jonas, the little fish that was swimming in the sea and asked everywhere where the ocean was. Some sent him upwards, others sent him down to the bottom – yet everywhere he found the same. Until an old fish helped him see: “The ocean is that which surrounds you.” Eternity, the Kingdom of God, it surrounds is, it is in us and around us. We can learn to become perceptive of it and open ourselves to its presence.**

**And yet, where is it and how can we become aware of God?**

**The theologian Rudolf Bultmann said sometime quite sobering: “Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, and all that we got was the Church”. That sounds like the church was second choice, or even worse: as if the church could not be anything else than a disappointment, for what Jesus wanted was not necessarily the church. That is what we hear often when it comes to church. Whatever people understand when they hear the word Church, often enough it is connected somehow with disappointment:**

**The church as a building: too sterile, too bare, too cold…**

**The church as an overseeing institution: too far away from people, too political, too bureaucratic, too non-political…**

**The church as worship: too long, too boring, too aloof, too hard to understand…**

**The church as their representatives: never there when you need them…**

**The church as a historical entity: a monster, involved in the worst crimes on humanity…**

**The sad is: nothing that is said is wrong. The good is: for all of those observations there are also the positive opposite experiences. The limitation: The church is nearly always being identified with a building, a concrete service, a certain person or an institution.**

**I now want to change the sentence of Bultmann and say: “Jesus preached the Kingdom and what came were “You”: the members, friends, confirmands and confirmand parents, the children and their parents and the visitors.**

**You who came stand in a great movement that started with Jesus. You are here because you want to be part of this movement. Because you want to hear and learn from the man who says: “The Kingdom of God is in your midst” and “The Kingdom of God is near”. Yet how do we prepare for this Kingdom of God and how might it be when Jesus one day will come back again?**

**Jesus says: “The Kingdom of God does not come so that you could prove it or observe it”. For the Pharisees part of their faith praxis was to look for signs that the Messiah would come and to prepare for that important day. The Jewish author ReManes Sperber tells in his autobiographical book: “Die Wassertraeger Gottes/ The water bearers of God” how the inhabitants of his hometown Zlabotow in Galizien prepared for the coming of the Messiah. Mostly he remembered: “In my childhood we children would practice regularly to stand or walk on our hands as much as possible. We had learned that when the Messiah would come, he would turn the world upside down. Therefore we trained every day in “messianic gymnastics as we called it”. Sperber even as an older person always remembered this hope, no the strong conviction that the world will be changed, is changeable and nothing has to stay as it is – and that you need to practice and prepare for it!**

**What a wonderful exercise! To stand on your hands and change perspective. To keep the longing for God’s Kingdom alive and awake, and to practice to find its shape and presence in our everyday lives and experiences. I imagine these children how they are swaying back and forth in their efforts to stay straight in their exercise and how their feet are sticking into the sky. Reversed world. Who is carrying whom? Is the earth carrying the children or are they carrying Heaven with their feet?**

**The beautiful is that they are expecting something, something that is different and that makes happy. Something that will exchange the up and the down. Something that will make them experts. They will be the one who are prepared, who will be the first to recognize when the New arrives. And thus their expecting the arrival of God and his messenger, the messiah. He will turn the world upside down.**

**The confidence of these children and their longing for God’s Kingdom touch me heart.**

**Yes, but where is the Kingdom of God we might be asked as Christians. It is not so easy to answer this question. One can tell about one’s experiences with God or about that, which others have experienced with God, but if others keep asking with critical and ongoing questions, all answers seems to melt like snow between one fingers. All answers are not provable in a scientific way. Those could be random coincidences or imaginations. Surely, we know they were not, but how could we ever prove that?**

**A small boy sees a shooting star. He tells his friends: “There was a shooting star”. The others say: “Where? Show us!” but the boy says: “Now it is surely gone”. “Oh, well, you can tell us anything!” How do you prove that you have really seen a shooting star? Or that you met God? That you saw a glimpse of God’s Kingdom here on earth? How would you ever do that?**

**As you think about it, it is logical. “Kingdom of God” describes a condition when God’s will is happening. However, in order to recognize that God’s will is, we first of all need to enter into a relationship with this God. You cannot measure God or explore God like you can the tropical rainforest or a star in the universe. For that God is much too big. God is so incomprehensible large and so different from anything we can know and are able to research or explore. We cannot comprehend God with our scientific methods. However, we can enter into a relationship with God. And this is what Jesus came to invite us for. Everything that we want to know about God we experience as we encounter God and live in relationship with God.**

**God is not an object, but God is a subject. God is not an “it”, but God is a “you”. Therefore one cannot just study the Christian faith from a distance, but needs to enter into it and live it to understand it.**

**Maybe it is a little like traveling to a new country. Surely you get information before the trip. You read books, watch videos and talk to people who have already been in that country before. But only once you visit the new country for yourself you can truly understand what the other people were talking about. This country is so different that you can only understand it when you have been there yourself. The same is true for God’s Kingdom. You can only experience it when you allow to belong, when you agree to enter into God’s presence with all of who you are.**

**Also for us as a congregation we are invited to practice “Messianic gymnastics”, but not by walking around on our hands, but by practicing to live in God’s presence. Messianic gymnastics means: To offer God one’s own perspective and to experience how God might turn it upside down. To allow being surprised by moments of God’s love, mercy and grace. To help building the Kingdom of God as Jesus’s sermon on the mountain says, to celebrate as part of the church and to give witness with all of our life that God is real.**

**And then there is still the future experience of God’s Kingdom. Jesus said that the coming of the final Kingdom of God will be “like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other”. When I was a child this image felt somewhat scary to me. But then I learned that lightening does not have to be threatening, for lightening brings energy, light and even release – instant illumination.**

**The most important in our exercises to discover more of God’s Kingdom is to most of all be excited and happy about our hope of what is happening and what is to become, instead of being afraid of it. And that we without fear go about what are natural parts of our daily life, like eating, drinking, celebrating, laughing and working.**

**I want to give a funny example for this. It happened in the 19th century, somewhere in the Mid-West region (the so called “Bible belt”). The state parliament was having a session and one of the representatives was holding a speech about something that is no longer important today. Suddenly it got really dark in the room, the earth was rumbling, strong winds shook the windows. The other statesmen were worried and looked out the windows worrying what nature was up to. So the speaker called out to them “My fellow men, there is absolutely no reason to interrupt our meeting. Either our Lord Jesus is coming right now: then he should find us doing our work. Or he is not coming: then we have to continue our work anyhow!”**

**With this humorous story and with this joyful serenity of faith, let us walk attentively and awake towards the day when God’s Kingdom finally comes in all its fullness.**

**Amen**