

Psalm 19

1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
 2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
 3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
 4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.
 In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
 5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.
 7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;
 8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
 9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.
 11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.
 12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.
 13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.
 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!
 Dear members of this academic audience, Dear sisters and brothers in Christ

I have been invited to preach in this service today at March Chapel. Being a guest from Frankfurt university, who visits Boston and BU for the first time, of course this is a great privilege and an exciting moment in my life as well. I am used to present academic lectures to a larger audience since 25 years, besides I have been preaching in various congregations as an ordained person for 20 years. However it is my first time to try this in another than my mother tongue. And to a people living in a different world than my own, sharing another daily life, looking at the world from another place, from another cultural background and from another religious life and probably from different theological perspectives. If preaching is about an encounter with a new world within our own world, if it is about getting in touch with the other and the otherness, this very situation now provides more than enough elements not to escape getting in touch with the strangeness. However I beg your patience for doing that with my poor English.

The text prescribed for this day is psalm 19. Usually psalms in German and European services are used as part of the liturgy but less as basis for the preaching. I did not choose for this piece of scripture. Nevertheless I am very

glad and thankful to be urged to meditate with you about this text and about God's message to us within it. And you will see soon that this is not only intended to sound polite.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God” In my inner memory the sound of this text is always related to specific tones, to Martin Luther's German translation “Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes”. And to my inner ears just automatically appear the majestic tones of the openings quire of Johan Sebastian Bach's related cantata (you could enjoy within the liturgy), which I have been listening to on many, many Sundays during my life.

Today reflecting on this well known text there are three elementary comprehensive messages in this text from another world to which I want to draw your attention. I am fully aware of the fact that I do so as a human being living in my time and in my professional academic context, listening to scripture together with you with late modern ears, and trying to understand the message within the frame of nowadays academic theology.

The message and the language of this text are enthusiastic, and clear. In a comprehensive way the author of the psalm is praising God's creation, and then moves on to other issues, likewise in a most comprehensive language. The phrases are so clear, they don't seem to need any theological clarification. Nevertheless they contain heavy theological issues, in three parts. The first seven verses are praising creation, verse 8 and followers **The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul** draw on the thora, on God's law and precepts, the final passage from verse 11 **Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward** is focussing on the faithful servant and his or her answer to God's revelation in nature and in scripture. These three parts address a full theological program. To translate it into dry words and abstract concepts, one could say the psalm is about a triangle of nature, society and the individual, in academic labels: about science, jurisprudence, and psychology.

However an expression “*In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, 5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy*” taken as scientific proposition simply would be a mis-take. It would be disastrous already for a high school pupil to use it in his exams in physics. Likewise if we recommended a sentence like “*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple*” to a judge at the supreme court he or she would have argument about the constitutional validity as basis for any sentence within a secular democracy. And also the final passage directed to the believer and his inner religious experience does hardly fit to modern secular psychology.

But those associations about the psalm in themselves are leading us on the wrong track. It is not late modern science, not political theory and not modern psychology which speak out of these verses. It is rather a piece of ancient faith out of the distance of more than 4000 years and a completely different worldview that we are facing in this text.

The first point: What does the text intend? And what does it open up in its ancient way of expression? Certainly it does not aim at scientific discoveries in a modern sense, it does not take the world as detached and distinct objects. The psalm is talking about the world in connection with God, it interprets the world towards God. If we check the three passages of the text we may identify three theological perspectives: the text contains theology of creation, it is about the core of thora, and it points at the internal light of faithful human beings.

In a poetic way the three parts of the psalm contain heavy theological assumptions. Just to mention some of them:

- as to the first part about creation, it contains several insights: e.g. Not the sun is godlike as the Egyptians believed it, but it is simply “his handiwork”; e.g. creation is giving testimony for God, without speech and word and yet to be heard
- as to the second part about the thora: God*s word has a centre and aim as well, it is not about this and that, but finally about righteousness and truth
- as to the third part about human beings, also there the text puts forward theological notions. It speaks about the limitations of our existence, about sin and merciful grace.

These and other elements of the text give way and challenge our current theological reflection of life and world 2004. And they provide critical insight looking at the world. To give you just one example. To name the world God*s creation and to distinguish between God and God*s creatures provides a critical look upon current tendencies to make the world more grandiose than it deserves. During the recent Olympic games at Athens the constant attempts to declare the athletic games part of a cosmic drama that lead to eternal glory and peace struck me. This does not really fit to the daily news about doping and other scandals. In the light of psalm 19 I may ask: Isn’t it enough if the competitors try their utmost best and we as spectators enjoy it and feel enthusiastic about it as human effort?

This is the first point, critical insight into the world in front of God.

The second point, now coming back to the beginning: Where does faithful life start according to the text? The answer of the text was and is really striking to me:

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In this enthusiastic way we are invited to

open our eyes and ears, we are forced to look at the world in order to appreciate its overwhelming beauty of the cosmos, of nature. Appealing to your natural surrounding today I may ask: Is there any other place and time on earth that might provide more evidence for the truth of this biblical phrase? Whatever the complicated historical growth of psalm 19 in ancient literature might be - there is no doubt about the historical fact that the desert of Sinai and Palestine formed the life world of the biblical author more than three thousand years ago. Nevertheless I ask, if there is any better proof which could fit to the text, than enjoying the marvellous colours during these weeks of Indian summer out in New England's woods?

To sum up this second message of the text towards the world in a formal way, it is most obvious: Psalm 19 relates on enjoying the world by sensual perceiving of all its beauty. The testimony the author brings forward about the splendour and majesty of the world as God's creation starts with a particular impulse: drawing our attention to God's creation given in our senses. This sort of theology does not invite us closing our eyes, going down deep into meditative layers, but with a call to relate on seeing, touching and smelling the world. To use again academic labels, the text starts with "data". That might sound strange and even blasphemous to faithful ears. But "datum" in the original latin meaning of the word is about something immediately given in our senses, in eyes and ears, before we reflect, invent, or change it in our mind. The psalm starts with the givenness of the world, with the testimony that the praise of God deeply is connected to a sensual encounter of the world outside. At the moment I will only mention this phenomenological impulse of the biblical text we are focussing now. There are perhaps other opportunities these days at BU to follow this biblical discovery further in theological reflection.

But this second point might rise questions and problems especially among those who are not freshmen in theology: What about the language of creation about the comprehensiveness of the **voice that goes out through all the earth?** What about the relation between the natural revelation and the supernatural revelation, not to forget about the old reformation tradition of the internal inspiration of the believer's inner light? These are questions that are provoked by reading the text today with theological trained eyes and understanding. However the text in itself does not fully solve these heavy problems. Not because its author has a poor mind, but in my view simply because he did not intend to focus these questions. The very centre and essence of the text is not to open an academic discourse about the dogmatic issue of revelation. The point of

this text is not to contribute to knowledge about God, rather to contribute to poetry towards God. It is a poetic habit that speaks out of the whole text of this composer, singer, and praying person. Somebody, who is in love of poetic enthusiastic expressions, rises his or her voice. He or she does not intend to give a lecture, to make propositions, in order to make notes.

In the commentaries on this psalm we find a way of interpretation that heavily draws on the indubitable authority and validity of God's word. And usually they point at sentences like **"The law of the LORD is perfect; the decrees of the LORD are sure"**. However I must confess some difficulties with a legalistic or even a fundamentalist interpretation of this text. Because of the dominance of a particular poetic stance **"Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge"** do not express pettiness or doubts about God and the validity to praise him. I rather feel the freedom as well as the passion to talk to God in hymnal and poetic language. To me the psalm is expressing joy about life and about poetry. Its main interest is not to argue but to compose. The psalm essentially is not a piece of theo-logy but rather a piece of theo-poetry, to use a metaphor of one of my theological teachers in Europe.

What is the purpose and the use of the text? Let me put the question slightly different: What is the purpose and the use of poetry? What is the profit of verses, love-songs, lamentations? What is the profit of singing to God? My answer: Poetic verses simply do not intend to give some profit. They have their benefit in themselves. They do not intend to reach any further goal, than one thing: singing and inviting others to join the choir. There is a tiny little piece of the text I omitted so far: The headline "to the choirmaster", in my translation of Martin Luther this is translated: a psalm of David to be sung" This piece of theo-poetry has its original place within the service, in the synagogue, in the church.

You might ask: poetry, singing, nothing else? And what about the evil of the world, about sin, about millions of starving people, about innocent civilians who are killed also today in Iraq, in Natanya or in Afghanistan? We are living in a world, that does not follow poetic rules, but is full of darkness and death.

Yes of course, would be my answer. And it was already the answer of those in old Israel who composed and sung the psalms. Psalm 19 is not the only poem in this book but surrounded by 149 others. And people didn't always sing hallelujah in these hymns. Going back only one single piece, in psalm 18 **"The cords of Sheol entangled me the snares of death confronted me."**

And likewise the psalms Jesus prayed contain heavy complaint. His last words at Golgatha were verses of a psalm.

Therefore I would conclude: also our text today, psalm 19 and other psalms do not answer to all our ambivalent experiences just with naive cheer.

However they risk the freedom to joy despite the evil and the dark. And they invite us to do so in every service we celebrate. They invite us to keep living the

most fundamental questions of life that go beyond reason and human knowledge. Their means are poetic expressions, metaphoric language and symbolic images . Images don't give all answers to our questions. But they provide a space to keep us being in touch with traces of God. The poetic means they offer does not lead to any profit. However this superfluous space of liturgy is part of God's creation. And it is of great benefit for human life. It even might provide energy to die, But this again is a problem we might reflect upon. The composer of psalm 19 does not do this, he just sings.

Schluss

And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ
Amen.

Zur Liturgie ? Eingang Bach Kantate
Ende mit Kari Bremnes Song
oder D. Sölles Gedicht