

10.05.2010: Prof. Dr. Michael Welker über Psalm 19-engl. Version

Sermon on Psalm 19 on Sunday Rogate

9 May 2010 in the University Church of St Peter, Heidelberg

Preacher: Prof. Michael Welker

Preaching text: 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 hidden 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 for ever;
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.

Sermon Text (translation):

“The heavens are telling the glory of God!” Christian Fürchtegott Gellert and Ludwig van Beethoven have made Psalm 19 into one of the best known spiritual hymns in our culture, even beyond the walls of the church. “The heavens are telling the glory of God, day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.” The order of creation with its rhythms of day and night praises the creator. No surprise that so-called natural theology could arrive at the idea that God was the “perfect watchmaker”! Yet is this creation psalm actually praising God because the psalmist is convinced God has created a perfect piece of machinery?

We “enlightened” people, who are continually being informed (and alarmed) about events around the globe, are not the first ones to be aware the world is anything but a smoothly-functioning machine. *The Blind Watchmaker* is the title Richard Dawkins gave to one of his books, which did not attack Christian faith quite as aggressively and was not quite as ideological as his bestseller, *The God Delusion*. Yet regardless of what natural theology and the new atheism come up with, God is neither a blind nor a sighted watchmaker. And creation is not a perfect machine, nor can we make the claim it is a paradise.

While creation in the classical biblical creation accounts in Genesis 1 is called “good” and even “very good,” the word “good” - *tov* in Hebrew – means conducive to life and not glorious, nor does it mean paradisaical or even divine. Creation, clearly differentiated from God, has bright spots and shadows, which Psalm 19 addresses. Both the bright days and the dark nights praise God. Most biblical traditions associate the night with a lack of safety and security, with threats, danger and terror. Thieves and enemy warriors come in the night, as well as storms which we

are helpless to withstand in the darkness and unsettling thoughts that rob us of sleep. The night is not seen in a positive light, in contrast to the view of some Romantic poets. Yet even the night must murmur its praises of the creator.

The psalm portrays the brighter sides of creation in much more detail. With many words the sun is praised as a handsome bridegroom and hero. But even the sun can be unrelenting and even dangerous, when its rays sting, dehydrate, scorch and burn. The psalm merely hints at this with the phrase: "Nothing is hidden from its heat!" The psalm does not say what is certainly also imaginable: its light also gives joy to the human heart. The joy of the heart is the subject of the second part of the psalm.

This part speaks about God's law, God's instructions, the *Torah*. It has been suggested repeatedly that the two parts of Psalm 19 should be separated. A psalm about nature and a psalm about the law are to be distinguished here. But just as the golden sun disperses the dark night, and by its light we are able to orient ourselves in the world, in the same way the good law given by God overcomes chaos and dissension and uncertainty. What is more, the good law of God ennobles the soul because through it the soul becomes aware of the wisdom and goodness of God, which is oriented towards humanity in the law. The one praying the psalms praises God's law repeatedly trying out new approaches and inflections. The law shows the way to righteousness, truth and the knowledge of God. Therefore it is precious, more precious than honey and more desirable than the purest gold. The golden sun corresponds to the image of the fine gold in abundance and the honey from the comb. The law, which brings light, is not a burden but a joy.

Just as the sun must cast out the night again and again, so the law of God must also do battle with injustice, uncertainty about the law and rights, and a lack of compassion. In addition to the obvious breaches of the law, aggressive immorality and the blasphemy of the evil-doer must be curtailed and overcome. Even the hidden faults and unknown guilt must be uncovered and avoided. We are thus dependent on God and God's help not only in dealing with nature's gray zones and darkness, but also in the gray zones and darkness of our own cultural situations. Thus, those praying the psalm not only praise God with clear words and rejoicing, but also ask God that the mutterings of our hearts would be pleasing to God, just as God can be glorified by the murmurings of the night.

With its description of the rhythms of day and night, Psalm 19 captures the power of the law to both illuminate and warn, yet it is far from comprehending all forms of night and darkness, of guilt and suffering in creation. Many other biblical texts examine more deeply such experiences

of danger and affliction, innocent suffering, and doubt and despair with regards to God's goodness. Psalm 19 is a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of praise, a glorification of the creating and redeeming God. It can only provide glimpses of the darker and more dangerous aspects of creation, while gratefully viewing creation in light of the goodness of God.

These days we often like to talk about nature and life as though we were dealing with terms related to salvation. This is wrong. Creation is not paradise, and nature is ambivalent, just like the sun, which at times can warm us, revive us and make us glad, but which can also scorch, burn, dehydrate and kill. All life lives at the expense of other life. Even vegetarians have to destroy countless other living beings to sustain themselves. Creation is good; it is oriented towards supporting and sustaining life. But it is not divine, but rather it has been created by God and is clearly distinct from God. This fact is often overlooked. Creation, which encompasses both nature and culture, also confronts us with the night, with danger, suffering, and death. The law must continually take a stand against injustice, brutality and lies, and the willingness to use violence. God does not spare us from creation's own dark power nor from the manifold ways that humanity turns away from God's will and against God's goodness.

But creation is also full of good examples of order, fecundity, knowledge, love, success, and blessing. These are the primary focus in the psalm. The psalm rejoices in the proper ordering of creation and the illuminating power of the law and wisdom. But in-between the lines we come to understand that, even in the night and in times of need, we can trust in God, that we can count on God as our rock and our redeemer. God can also create something new and good out of suffering, affliction and death. For this reason, we should bring before God not only our praise but also the murmurings of our hearts, our helplessness, complaints and laments. In our earthly life we are not only surrounded by the jubilation of creation. We experience not only powerlessness and helplessness in and among us, but also people who are dishonest and are intent on doing evil who make our lives more difficult. The psalm calls them the insolent or evil-doers. But in the end even the evil-doers must serve to praise God. For even in them God wishes to be proven our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.