

**Acts 8 27to39 ELCSA (N-T) Synod closing service 2017**  
Hermannsburg KZN

Dear sisters and brothers,

“Fear not ... I have called you by name!” This is the theme of the synod of ELCSA (N-T), that comes to an end today. Just under 80 synod members gathered in Hermannsburg, KZN, since Thursday evening to deliberate, discuss and elect deans and some members of church council.

More important than the laws, budget and elections is the question: Where are we going as church?

Synod literally means: Journeying together. So this synod spend a good time asking precisely that question: Where to are we journeying together?

Each synod period lasts for 6 years, and therefore we can think in “blocks of 6 years”. Where are we going for the next six years?

The theme is taken from Isaiah 43. God speaks to his people Israel through the prophet. The people have been in exile in Babylon for two generations. Many had given up on the promised land. Others had even given up on God - “He has forgotten us” they would say.

But now God says: I have not forgotten you. In fact, I called you by name! You are mine!

And then he continues: I have great plans for you! I am preparing something new! I am leading you back into the promised land!

In stead of jubilation the prophet however is met with doubt and sad faces. All but the oldest know only Babylon as their home. And the oldest remember with trembling the terrible journey from Jerusalem to Babylon. They were small children then, but even today they have nightmares about the fires that swept across the plains and the injuries that people sustained. They remember brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts or grandparents that drowned when they had to cross rivers.

No - returning to Jerusalem was no good news to them.

But God knows their thoughts, their justified concerns. And so he continues: When you go through the fire, you will not be scorched, when you travel through floods, you will not drown.

The road ahead indeed is full of dangers - but, fear not, I will guide and protect you!

During the four days of synod we focussed on various aspects of this promise of God. It begins with the wonderful promise: I have called you by name! God has seen you! You are special to God!

Then we asked: Who is this Lord who calls us. From Isaiah 43 it is clear that he is not the absent God, the one who has forgotten his people. The whole chapter is full of God saying: “I will...!” God is involved!

All to often we see our faith as: We have to do this or that. But God makes it clear that the foundation of our faith is that HE IS AT WORK! Our future, in the very first instance, depends on HIM! He is the one who prepares the way, who gives direction.

On Saturday we then discussed the fires and floods on the way. When God leads, it does not mean that the road is easy and without obstacles. Even for Christians life can be tough, and will be tough in places.

God does not remove the tough parts, but guides us through.

We dealt with various issues that are difficult to cope with. These were sent in by the

congregations of our Church. From all that were sent in we chose the four themes that were mentioned most:

Our broken society with all its challenges

Living in a multicultural environment

Pressures and demands of modern society

The divided Church

Being a Christian does not mean to withdraw from these challenges into a safe cocoon. That would be like staying in Babylon rather than following God’s call. Being a Christian implies that we name the fires and floods, that we bring them to God and trust that he will guide us through.

We asked: What is the Christ minded response to these challenges? To just name them and complain about them is like sitting on the bank of the river moaning that it is blocking the way, or huddling up in fear as a fire approaches.

When Luther wrote the 95 Theses he did not only complain and accuse. He named the wrongs and then stated what Christ has to say to us.

For us as Christians it means: We open our eyes, see the challenges, cry to the Lord and then tackle them under his guidance!

Now, this morning, the Synod is closing off with the service in the Hermannsburg congregation. The topic of the closing service is:

Fear not ... you shall be my witnesses.

Earlier on I said that people often think that to be a Christian is to have to do this or that. Is this the catch now? As they say in Afrikaans “Die slap riem waarmee ons gevang word”? We must be witnesses?

Of course being a witness can be seen as “I have to ...” But actually being a witness means to tell what you have seen and observed. Or, in this case, to tell what God has been doing and is doing. So it still is all about our Lord being at work!

The text that is guiding us this morning is from Acts 8. It tells the story of Philip, one of the seven deacons elected in Acts 6, who meets the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Let us hear this story:

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” 27So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”*

*30Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. 31“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

*32This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:*

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”*

*34The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” 35Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

*36As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” [37] 38And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

Until recently Philip had been in Jerusalem, part of the team of deacons caring for the

physical needs of the young and vastly growing church. But then fire and flood struck - Stephen, one of them, was stoned to death and a severe persecution started. The young congregation scattered all over the country.

“Fear not” - it soon became clear that this was not the end of the Church. Rather, this fire, this raging flood started an even greater spread of the gospel, because as the Christians fled, they did not hush up, but shared the good news.

Can we dare to believe that our current fire and flood situation in South Africa is not only a threat to the church, but that the Lord can use it to spread the gospel?

Back to the story: There are two people whom the Lord “calls by name” in this passage: Philip and the Ethiopian. Philip has been called before, when he was elected as deacon. The Ethiopian however deserves special attention.

Although he is a very powerful man, minister of finance of the Ethiopian queen, and although he dearly longs for God, he stands no chance with God. As Eunuch he is disqualified. The Old Testament laws are clear that a castrated man cannot come before God and should be shunned.

Although he had travelled to Jerusalem to pray, he was excluded. And although he had enough money to buy one of the biggest and most expensive scrolls, the book of Isaiah, to take home, he remained an outsider. His physical condition was irreversible, an eternal barrier banning him from God's people.

“I have called you by name” - he does not realise it yet, but God has seen him, and God is about to change his life for ever.

With the next part we come to today's theme: You will be my witnesses.

It is fascinating to see how Philip goes about this, or rather, how the Lord leads him to go about this.

Philip could have stopped the chariot and asked the Eunuch: Are you saved?

Even more likely, he could have stated: Sorry, you do not qualify, Castrati, bad luck for you!

In stead he walks behind the chariot, listens to the man reading and only then asks: Do you understand what you are reading?

Being Christ's witness is not about confronting people with the gospel, nor with their shortcomings. It is about walking with them, hearing where they are and what they are grappling with.

We pastors are often accused of answering questions that no one has.

Philip does the opposite. He listens attentively and then asks the question that the Eunuch has.

Being Christ's witness means to take the other people serious, so serious that they invite us in!

Please note - Philip does not just jump onto the chariot, but gets invited. The Eunuch realises that this man can be trusted. This man does not shun him, but shows interest and concern. This man can be invited!

Dear sisters and brothers, how does our community view us? How are our congregations seen by others? As closed societies (Trespassers will be prosecuted!)? Or as restricted areas (Residents only)? I wish that our congregations will be viewed as places where you can come with your questions ( the big **i** of Tourist information!) and

feel welcome!

But even more important is the question: How does the stranger view me? Do I come across as hostile, irrelevant, not interested? Or do people sense that I care? Can I be invited?

Of course I cannot care about every person I meet. But I pray that I will have open ears to hear when the Lord says: Walk with that person! I pray that I will have open ears to hear what that person is struggling with. I pray that I will have the patience to wait to be invited, that I will not give up too soon and walk away. I pray that I will have the courage to let myself be invited, and not keep at a safe distance.

After Philip gets invited, he starts addressing the Eunuch's question and from there links it up with the good news of Jesus Christ. He does not say: Put aside your scroll, let me show you something better! He starts with what is precious to the Eunuch and from there shows what is more precious: Jesus Christ.

We need to understand that our witness to Christ is not to be contrasted to the questions of the people, but that Christ is the good news, the answer that ultimately changes lives - for ever!

I mentioned the four topics discussed yesterday. Stress, injustice, broken church, mixed communities. They are not separate from our faith. As we deal with these we can link them up with Christ, the healer, the comforter, the bridge builder, the transformer of lives. We do not need to forget the challenges before we can speak about faith. Rather the challenges are best tackled through our faith! The challenges lead us to show the relevance of our faith!

And now I come to the last, and for me the most challenging part.

After the Eunuch is baptised, we hear how the Spirit takes Philip away and the Eunuch went on his way rejoicing without seeing Philip again.

We heard at synod that our church is not growing. If I were Philip I would have taken the Eunuch with me, as my convert, to increase my church.

Dear sisters and brothers, we are not called to be witnesses to Christ so that our ELCSA (N-T) grows or that our congregations becomes bigger and better. We are called to be witnesses so that people can be set free in Christ.

Share Christ freely and abundantly, and then allow people to go their way rejoicing. Don't force them into your congregation. Don't try to keep them out of other congregations. Some will stay. Others will go.

The Eunuch became the first messenger of Christ to Africa, the seed for the African Church. Had Philip taken him into his congregation, Africa would have lost out!

Don't bind people to you, let them go and serve the Lord, just as you do. And you - carry on doing what the Lord calls you to do, Just as Philip did.

Fear not ... be my witness!

Amen

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