

„FIRM AND EAGER TO LEARN“

Sermon for the Opening Service of Synod, Harburg, 20 October 2011

(repeated in German on 30 October 2011, Johannesgemeinde, Pretoria)

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen.*

Brothers and Sisters,

to begin synod with a service is not only good and time-honored tradition but highly desirable indeed. As you probably know, the word ‘synod’ means: To be on a way together, to journey together. And if we do not remind ourselves where we are heading and how we want to reach our destination, it can easily happen that we end up in the wrong place or get lost altogether.

What do you need if want to reach your destination, if you don’t want to get lost? If we embark on a journey, we need three things: Firstly a destination or at least an idea of where I am heading and what my destination might be. If I leave Pretoria to attend synod in Harburg, the destination is pretty obvious: The Lutheran Church in Harburg and its meeting-hall, where I am expected. If I am on holiday, my destination may be a bit more vague: Down to the coast and see if we can find a nice camping site, or into the Drakensberg and find out where the weather is agreeable, and then we take it from there. That is not a problem so long as I know what I am looking for.

Secondly, you need a good map, which nowadays may be substituted by a GPS. If I enter unknown territory that is mandatory, but even if I know the roads quite well, I prefer having a map with me. You never know: You might wish to avoid some road works or some accident, only to get thoroughly lost. And thirdly: The most recent map, the most sophisticated GPS is of no use if I don’t know how to use them. If I don’t know the meaning of all the different signs on the map; if I forgot to read the manual of my brand-new GPS, I still might end up in a huge pothole on some dirt track in the middle of the night and in pouring rain.

My destination could be of my own choice, or it could be given to me. The maps I have to buy myself, the GPS preferably would be a birthday present –it doesn’t matter. But what does matter is that, in any case, I have to *learn* how to use them.

Which brings us – without much delay or road works – to the topic of our synod: “*Firm – and eager to learn.*”

What is our destination as church? Well, I hope that should be sufficiently clear. We did not chose it ourselves, it was given to us from the very first beginning. We, as ELCSA (N-T), have come up with the following definition a few years ago: „*ELCSA (N-T) is a Church that inspires people to joyfully live their lives, set free by Christ. They receive comfort and help in their lives and are given the opportunity to become involved according to their gifts and talents. In this they serve their fellow human beings, invite people to become believers and in the process contribute towards the growth of our congregations and the Church of Jesus Christ.*” We could use different words, of course, to express the same meaning, but the goal must always remain the same: To bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the people in such a way that they can understand and accept it as base and reason for their faith and their hope.

What, then, is our map? What helps us in navigating towards this goal? As children of the Reformation there can be no other answer for us but: The Bible. God’s Word. God’s utterances over the time, heard by his people, written down to share their experiences with God, kept and handed down through the generations so that we learn from it and live by it, as individuals as well as as church. But now the interesting question arises: How do we handle this ‘manual’? How do we find our way towards our destination with the Bible in our pocket (or probably better: in our hands)? How do we find our way – and: How do we walk our way, how do we keep track, how do we handle road works and detours on our way? And that, I am convinced – is a matter of learning, a matter of practice and of exercise indeed.

We find a good example for this attitude in the words that were chosen for this service and for the sermon today. They are taken from Deuteronomy 6 and they are like a summary of everything that went on before. The experience of being liberated from slavery in Egypt, the endless journey through the desert, the shattering experiences of God’s nearness and His wrath and, of course, the proclamation of the commandments, which have just been repeated in chapter 5. And

then Mose says: “*These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.*”

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you- a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant- then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

The speech carries on a bit longer, but here we have the bottom line, as we stand alongside Israel, with the desert at their backs and the promised land still hidden from their view. And here it is that the crucial question is to be decided: How shall we shape our relationship with the God who has liberated us and has brought us here? What will our relationship with God look like in the future? The basis is straightforward and clear: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* These words have ever since been the cornerstone of every faithful Jew, you find them in countless Jewish houses on their doorposts, they are kept in the small capsules which are tied on the hands and on the forehead of every pious Jew when he prepares for prayer: *Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.* But, what is much more important: These are the very words that have been handed down from generation to generation in Jewish families; parents have taught their children their importance and have explained to them who their God is and what it means to serve God. And all that with the one goal before their eyes: *Be care-*

ful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. This attitude has made Israel strong and impressive. Not in a political sense, not in outer appearance maybe, but in a religious sense: I can think of no other religion in which the written word is equally cherished and valued, there is no other religion in which reading and writing play such an important part in education. There is no other society in which the study of the Scriptures and the learner of the Tora is held in equally high regard. From the centre in Jerusalem to the remotest outpost of Judaism, the synagogue in the Yiddish ‘shtetl’, which, not coincidentally, was called ‘die shul’. They knew: Without the written word, without the tradition of learning, repeating and remembering we are nothing, less than nothing. And it is no surprise that all the religions that are children and grandchildren of Israel have inherited the same zeal for the word and the same eagerness in learning: Christianity and Islam.

How impressive is the widespread ability to memorize the Quran in Islamic tradition. How impressive is the tradition of learning and knowing the catechism by heart especially in our tradition. The influence of the Reformation for the founding and building of schools in Europe cannot be underestimated. All these are highly impressive examples for the one, fundamental insight: Without learning, without passing on the tradition we are in danger of losing track, of getting lost, of losing our identity.

Impressive without doubt, firm and steadfast for many centuries. But dangerous nonetheless. Dangerous, because in these traditions lies always the tendency that ‘firm’ becomes ‘rigid’ and that the solid foundation turns into a stiff straight-jacket. Whenever learning becomes nothing more than just a repetition of tradition, a brainless repeating of words without proper understanding, then there is the even greater danger of losing track altogether, because we then have confused the original meaning with a specific form of expression, and the living word has turned into the hollow clatter of empty syllables without meaning. And it is not difficult to find examples for this tendency, too: A hyper-orthodox Judaism which postulates that you can only serve God if you run around in frocks cut after the latest fashion from the 18th century; an Islam which tries to re-establish the society and rules of Mohamed’s time; an orthodox Christianity in which the fumes of incense blur the view onto today’s realities; a Catholic church that is firmly rooted in medieval

philosophy – and stuck there; in Protestant circles a fundamentalist attitude which manages to answer every single question with a quote from the Scriptures; a Lutheran Church, which holds Luther's Small Catechism firmly in its grasp and is deeply puzzled by modern challenges, unable to answer them. In short: A church or religion which seems to have forgotten that the snail from time to time has to shed its shell, lest it be crippled or suffocated. That is why we just sang of the church that she is "built on a rock" – not: dumb as a rock...

The traditional understanding of learning is always in danger of only repeating the well-known and well-rehearsed again and again. It is a restricted view that takes the single picture for the whole and has forgotten that any specific situation is only one aspect of reality and never the whole truth. And to avoid this danger, it is of utmost importance to look at another, a different understanding of learning: Not the repetition of well-known standards, but the ability to discover and accept new facts, to reflect on new situations and to include them into our concepts accordingly. A way of learning that opens itself up for life's sometimes strange and unexpected twists and turns. A way of learning that does not try to walk straight ahead when the road indeed takes a curve or where road works appear on the horizon. To discover this attitude, this way of learning, we have to take several steps back, we need to zoom out of the single picture and get an idea of the wider perspective. We have to look at the Bible as a whole, as a history of growing understanding and deepening insights – in fact: as a story of incessant learning. And if we do that, if we take up this challenge, we will discover that God himself is constantly learning. God gives us the best example for what it means to be always prepared to learn something new, to accept changing realities and to react accordingly. God, the biblical God, is indeed able and willing to learn!

Looking for examples? Well, look no further than to chapter 2 in Genesis: It takes God only a few – well, I suppose days or maybe weeks, it isn't stated clearly – to realize that his first idea of partnership for Adam wasn't quite convincing. Having failed to find an appropriate partner for him, Adam asks God to have another try. And only then comes God up with the brilliant idea that another human being might do the trick, so that Adam rejoices: "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*". Unfortunately, a few centuries down the line God feels forced to destroy almost all living beings on earth, only to discover afterwards

that this kind of 'solution' doesn't really work and promises: "*Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.*" Now that's a steep learning curve, isn't it? Then again, God is prepared to let other peoples trample down his beloved people; He lets them suffer under the mighty empires of Assur and Babylon, He allows them to occupy and devastate the promised land because Israel has, again and again, betrayed Him and broken the covenant. And then, 70 years later, he proclaims to Israel "*that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*" (Is 40:2) – only to remind them afterwards that there is absolutely no reason for becoming boastful and arrogant again. And finally: After many centuries and many strange twists and turns in their common history, God decides that it is time for a completely new approach altogether: He sends His Son and, by doing so, gives the relationship between God and mankind a completely new foundation. Obviously, Jesus does not proclaim a new, a different God, but he also does not just proclaim the same God as before. He proclaims a God who is willing to reveal Himself in a way that has been unheard of ever before.

No wonder that everyone who has understood this aspect of God, becomes a learner himself / herself. The most fascinating characters in the Bible, to me, are those that are as able and as willing to learn as God Himself. Abraham, who had to suffer inconceivable pain before it dawned on him that never again shall a human being be sacrificed in the name of some deity. Saul, for whom it only took an instant and some blinding light outside Damascus to throw away everything he believed in, everything that defined his very existence and henceforth know only Christ and him crucified. Peter, who needed a slightly disgusting vision to realize that God has called Jewish and non-Jewish people alike to become followers of Christ and that, in Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek. All these are people, examples of believers, who understood that a God who is able and willing to learn wants believers who are able and willing to learn as well. People who are ready to change their perspectives, to assess changing situations and react accordingly, ever flexible, but always firmly rooted in the one unchangeable principle: What does it mean to love God and to love your fellow human being as you love yourself?

I am convinced: Only if we accept the necessity of this kind of learning are we able to keep our faith from becoming irrelevant and obsolete, only if we do not confuse the single picture with the whole film, the stop-over with the destination, the single verse with the whole of the biblical story. In this spirit, Martin Luther found the courage to face century-old traditions as well as the mighty powers of his time and to rediscover and express some old truths in new words and new forms. In this spirit, some 19th century Christians were able to raise their voices against the century-old and even biblically sanctioned evil of slavery so that it was finally abolished (well, almost). In this spirit, the Ecumenical Council of Churches in 1948 found the unprecedented words that “war, according to God’s will, shall not be” (for some, it is still unheard of today!). In this spirit, churches in our country finally came to the conclusion that the system of apartheid can never be justified theologically.

So, despite all drawbacks and objections, the history of the church in its best parts has always been a history of learning, it is the story of God’s people who were willing to follow and learn from a God which is able and willing to learn Himself. As the history and development of every individual expression of faith is never complete and finished, so the history and development of the church’s expressions of faith is never finished and complete. Faith always remains a life-long process, for the individual as well as for the church. Because our journey is exactly that: a journey – and not a stop-over prolonged into eternity.

Are we ready to accept this challenge also for our church? Are we willing to confess that every single insight and understanding is only a stop-over on our way – even if it is the valued and honored tradition of Reformation or 19th century awakening, for which we are truly and with good reason grateful and remain indebted? “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” – “The church needs constant reformation”. Reformation itself had the courage to formulate this insight and thus pushed itself from the pedestal of false and dangerous enshrinement. Only then is the church true to itself if it is open to reform and reformation again and again.

What are the challenges that confront our church today? Where are we in need of learning today? Where is it necessary for us today to formulate new insights and to react to new situations? I believe the most eminent and noble task of synod

is not to enshrine history and sprinkle incense on our traditions, but to look at our reality with eyes wide open, to find the courage to identify new perspectives and maybe even to formulate one or two new insights and solutions – fully aware of the fact that none of our decisions are for eternity but only a guideline for the next part of the journey until new insights and new perspectives come up. The fundamental principle, the overall destination remains firm and unchangeable: To love God and to love your fellow human being as you love yourself so that he or she can trust this love we proclaim and confess. How that can be done in any specific situation – that remains a question of learning.

May God bless our synod, our discussion and deliberations; may he bless us with courage and wisdom and an eagerness to learn as we take up our journey over the next few days. May God bless our fellowship of learners! Amen.