

In our Lord Jesus Christ dear brothers,

The paper "**The *Ablaze!* Initiative in the LCMS - Theologically considered**" reflects on the *Ablaze!* initiative, with which the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod together with its partner churches wants to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The paper gives the background of the origin of this initiative and answers the questions "**Why was the term *Ablaze!* chosen?**" "**Where does mission begin?**" "**What motivates the followers of Jesus to take part in mission?**" "**How is God's mission done?**" "**Why involve laypeople in mission?**" and "**Why count?**". "**Planning and preparation for the missionary task**" is the final chapter of the paper.

It would be worthwhile for us to read this paper, as we consider what we are doing at this meeting as part of the *Ablaze!* initiative. But, the paper is too long to go through it in twenty minutes and I can only recommend it to you for your own reading and reflection.

We now want to listen to God's word and be encouraged by the Lord of the Church himself in our mission efforts.

I have said at another occasion that mission is nothing new to us. The first generation of our Synod mostly came to South Africa through the Hermannsburg Mission Society, and the FELSISA has from its very beginning supported the work of the Bleckmar Mission and has itself proclaimed the gospel to the outside.

But nevertheless we have to be encouraged again and anew to carry out the great commission of spreading the gospel. The *Ablaze!* initiative leads us perhaps to another type of mission work as we know it from the last 150 years. That can bring many advantages for

our time and circumstances. But whatever the way how mission work is done, the foundation of this task remains the same.

As basis for this reflection I have taken a text of the prophet Isaiah. This may surprise you perhaps, as mission work seems to be founded more in the New Testament. But we will see, that all the “ingredients” of mission are already present in this Old Testament text. Therefore it is very interesting to look at this our commission from this perspective.

Let me read Isaiah 49: 1-6

**Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.” But I said, “I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God.” And now the Lord says - he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring back Jacob to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength - he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept, I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you are my salvation to the ends of the earth.”**

Isaiah 49, 1-6

This word of the prophet Isaiah contains an enormous tension. The servant Isaiah talks about, is competently and wonderfully equipped by God with penetrating and far-reaching strength. He lives under God’s protection and has a magnificent promise: God wants to display his splendour in his servant. He shall proclaim the salvation to the whole world. Indeed, he shall not only proclaim the salvation to the ends of the earth but shall be the salvation himself.

But in sharp contrast to this assignment stands the experience of the servant. "I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing", he is forced to realise. Instead of the expected success, there is only failure and resignation and nothing can be seen of the promised splendour.

What this text means today for us we can only comprehend when we know who this servant is, about whom Isaiah talks.

This becomes clear when it is said of him that he shall not only proclaim the salvation, but that he **is** the salvation to the ends of the earth. This shows very clearly that Jesus Christ is the servant about whom Isaiah talks.

This is also confirmed by the New Testament, for instance in acts (chapter 8) when Philip responds to the question of the treasurer from Ethiopia about who the servant of God is with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

With that it becomes clear that the church as well is affected by what Isaiah says here about the spreading of the salvation to all people. Because Christ has passed this mandate on to his disciples with his great commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Math. 28, 19+20)

God wants the whole world to live in peace with him. It belongs to him since he created it. But after it deserted him, it shall become his property again through the proclamation of Christ's salvation to all people.

Therefore we are part of this commission to be witnesses of the Gospel and to proclaim the salvation which Jesus Christ has brought for all peoples.

At the same time we too experience the tension between God's equipment and promise and the inefficiency, yes indeed the

apparent failure of this assignment. We too are getting tired in fulfilling this duty.

This is the place where Isaiah speaks also to us. And the first thing we have to hear and shall learn is that God's salvation always takes place in a manner of nearly everything speaking against it. God works "in the contrary" Luther has said; this means under the appearance of the opposite. What this means we can see from Isaiah. He has proclaimed: (52.10) "All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God". At that time, together with his people, he was a captive of Babylon and was unfree and banned.

With our Lord Jesus Christ this manner of how God acts becomes even more obvious. The Lord has brought about the reconciliation with God for all people - but this has happened in the deepest humiliation by his death at the cross.

And when we look at the effectiveness of the Gospel today and measure it in terms of how little consent and faith it finds, then the proclamation of Christ is anything but promising. "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" already Isaiah had to ask (53.1).

He who suffers under this futile effort in the church shall know that this is part of the "law of Christ". That means that the church lives in the same lowness and humiliation as her Lord. Therefore we must not be surprised if we are always in an apparently losing position. The temptation of it isn't lifted with this knowledge and can affect us badly. But our objections are not the last word in this matter. The last word is with God in the same way today as it was at the time of Isaiah.

God has not taken back the commission to his servant when he could not see any success. But he renewed and even enlarged it and said: The previous order is "too small a thing... I made you also a light for the Gentiles, that you are my salvation to the ends of the earth." In the same way God comforts and strengthens also us

again and again and gives us new and bigger assignments.

Now we have to take something else into account with this text, which is extremely important for its understanding. It is namely written in the literary form of a **song of gratitude**. This means what is said here is not a complaint but the expression of **gratitude and thanks!** Those who are at the ends of the earth are called upon to join in **thanking** God. "Listens to me!" the servant shouts to them. "You are affected by God's salvation. It is also for you. My affair is also your affair. As difficult as the situation may be, my matter stands well, because God is in favour of it!

God's commission to proclaim his salvation is the firm foundation outside of us on which we can stand. Under temptation it is easy to loose ground under the feet, but by relying on God's commission and promises, we find a solid foundation again. Through this the temptation is overcome, because the commission, the equipment and the authorization to preach the gospel come from God.

It is simply a thing of obedience that the servant fulfills his commission. God wants to have the salvation to be proclaimed to the most distant areas. Therefore we do not have to ask whether doing mission work is possible or not, practical or not, promising to be successful or hopeless. We simply have to obey and do what the Lord wants us to do.

The servant of whom Isaiah speaks, knows that God in this sense had him at his disposal even before he was born. This is the strongest expression of the fact, that God's commission to proclaim the gospel does not come out of our own minds or motivation. Mission work is not our own wanting or liking but it is based on God's command! "I am compelled to preach", Paul writes (1. Cor. 9.16). It is not put to the discretion of the messenger, whether he wants to spread God's salvation or not. He must do it, even if everything speaks against it - in season and out of season (2<sup>nd</sup> Tim. 4.2). Our commission to be witnesses of the gospel is founded in God's will.

This decides also the motivation behind all mission efforts. If we want to be part of the *Ablaze!* initiative because we would like to see our own congregations and church grow in members, we are acting for the wrong reason. God's only reason for spreading the gospel is to **save** people from eternal damnation and to bring them peace with him through his Son Jesus Christ. And this can be the only motivation for us as well.

God does not only give the order to spread his word, but also equips to carry out this task. The servant says that God makes his mouth, which means the word preached by him, like a sharp sword and like a pointed arrow, whereby the sword is a weapon for close range and the pointed arrow one for the long distance. In addition to this the servant has as a shield the protection of God's guarding hand. God covers him with the shadow of his hand and keeps him secure like an arrow in the quiver. With that the servant is completely and comprehensively equipped for his task to proclaim the salvation to all world.

The Bible says in several places that God's word is an effective word and that it functions like a "weapon". It can indeed "strike hard" and "pierce". But not because it wants to destroy and ruin, but because it wants to save and bring salvation. It can be that it hits us hard, because it fights against the bad within us and against the evil one, who is delighted about it. But the fundamental tone of Isaiah's message is: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. (40,1) God's true word is the **healing** word which wants to **save** the people, but which "cuts through the heart" (Acts 2:37) so that they repent and find the salvation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is how the servant is equipped. He can trust in the strength of this word. After the word has been sent out, it will not return empty to God but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for what he has sent it (Isaiah 55:11).

Another fundamental point is the legitimation, the authorization and the entitlement by God. That means that God assists his messengers and stand behind them and also protects them. The

servant does not need to defend himself. God justifies him.

It is also important that the servant has his "reward" with God. That means that all his work and also its results lie with God. The servant only carries out the work of the one who has sent him. He doesn't need to worry about the results of his work. The most important thing is, that he is not disobedient and doesn't move back. God knows what he wants to make from this and how he does it.

We can all the better and with much more joy participate in the worldwide mission commission when we realize that it isn't about growth of our own church or submission of other people but about rescue. It is all about that all people are **saved**. If it wouldn't be all about saving, we didn't need to do mission work.

According to verse three God wants to be praised. This happens by the world being saved. Or said differently: That God commits himself not against us but for us and in our favour and for our salvation, this is the Gospel, the good and joyful message.

The world isn't saved automatically. The salvation is offered in the servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the salvation! And this salvation is given to everyone who praises God by accepting his offer of mercy.

It is our commission as Christians who live under this Gospel to proclaim and spread this word. God has also us equipped with his word and given us the guarantee, " that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Cor. 15:58). Therefore let us in faithfulness be his messengers and witnesses. Amen

Lord, our God, dear father in heaven, you are not looking for fruit which has ripened in our hands, but for people who in faithfulness carry out your commission to proclaim your Gospel to all people. Give us the gratefulness and joy to proclaim your worldwide salvation in your Son Jesus Christ to all people, so that you are glorified. Amen.

Peter H. F Ahlers