

All Lutheran Service Pretoria 27 August 2017
I Corinthians 1:10-18

The Apostle Paul writes:

10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

11 My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

14 I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.)

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

"God is good" "all the time" - "All the time" "God is good"

Dear sisters and brothers,

the excitement is high in Olympus - the site of the ancient Olympic games. Dignitaries and top athletes have gathered for the start of the Olympic torch run. From here the flame will be carried by many athletes to every continent on earth, until, at the opening ceremony, the flame will be used to light the gigantic olympic torch in the main stadium.

Did you notice? I did not say: the torch will be carried, but: The flame will be carried! Actually, the torch with which the flame is lit, will never reach the stadium. But the flame will. The original flame gets passed on from torch to torch till it reaches the stadium.

But where does the original flame come from? From the sun. A large concave mirror is used to light the first torch and this flame then gets passed on. For safety sake three more torches are lit from this first torch and kept in reserve, in case something happens on the way and the flame gets extinguished.

The furthest distance that the flame travelled thus far was in 2008. It travelled a distance of 137 000 km, across all continents, carried by altogether 21 800

athletes before reaching the main stadium in Beijing. Although the Olympics were called "Games of Harmony" on it's route the flame was extinguished multiple times by protestors, and the spare flames were needed to get it going again. And in quite a few places this torch run, which is meant to bring together people, had to happen under tight security, even with the exclusion of the public, because of safety concerns.

Two thousand years ago a different torch run was started. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, he said: It is finished, it is completed, it is done! He had paid the price for all our wrongdoings and made it possible for human beings to be reunited with God, the Father almighty!

When, after Easter, he told his disciples: Go and preach this good news to all nations, it was like the launch of this torch run. Hundreds, thousands, yes, millions of Christians would carry this flame to all continents on earth, from generation to generation, from nation to nation, from one human being to the other. Whereas the olympic flame is lit by the sun, the flame of the gospel is lit by the Son! Christ is this flame!

But this "Run of Salvation" would not be without problems. Many attempts would be made to snuff out the fire. These attempts would come from without and from within. Yes, also from within the Church!

The scripture that we just heard, talks about one of the very early challenges that the gospel faced, a challenge that threatened to kill the flame of the gospel.

The city of Corinth - it could be compared to Durban - was a very busy, cosmopolitan place with many ideas, doctrines and religions.

The Apostle Paul arrived there, carrying his torch burning with the gospel of Jesus Christ. A congregation was established. But, as is the case in big cities, Paul was not the only Christian Missionary coming. Appolos came too, and others on instruction of the Apostle Peter. Although they all carried the same flame, the same gospel of Jesus Christ, their approach was different.

To use the olympic torch as illustration: Although the flame, passed on from one to the other, is of the original flame, each torch looks differently. Some even smell differently, or the flame has a different colour due to a different oil. But it still is the original flame.

The congregation in Corinth picked up the different "smells and colours" of the various missionaries and then grouped themselves behind them - and in that process started working against each other. Soon a battle was raging as to who is to be believed, who has the truth, who is the real messenger of salvation.

The irony is that these battles in Corinth were actually killing the flame of the gospel. When Christians fight against each other, it is always at the expense of the spread of the message of Christ.

In this passage Paul sets the priorities straight when he says: Paul, Peter, Appollos were not crucified for you! Christ was! You were not baptised in our names - but in the Name of Christ!

Yes, each missionary has a different style, a different way of preaching, different ways of explaining the gospel. Some do it with more eloquence, or more logical arguments than others. But, says Paul, the power of the gospel does not lie in eloquence and complicated arguments. It lies in what Christ did on the cross. The power of the gospel lies in Christ himself.

It is almost as if Paul contrasts words of wisdom and eloquence with the power of the gospel. Although words and wisdom are used to carry the gospel, the power lies in the gospel, in Christ, who transforms people. That is why I used the illustration of the olympic flame. The torch is used to carry the flame. If you take the flame away, the torch is just an interesting ornament. Take the gospel of Christ away, and the doctrines and teachings of the Church are just interesting (or sometimes boring!) discussions and opinions, irrelevant for the salvation of the world.

This is so important for Paul, that he uses the first three chapters of the letter to ensure that we understand where the priority of the Church lies - not in the messenger, not in the way the message is brought, but *that it is brought*. His deliberations culminate in the wonderful sentence: No one can lay any other foundation than the one that has been laid - Jesus Christ! (1 Cor 3,18)

Today we commemorate 500 years of Reformation. In 1517 the flame of the gospel was burning very low. Fortunately Johan von Staupitz, Martin Luther's spiritual guide, had told him about Christ, had shown him that Christ sets free. And when Luther was working on the book of Romans, this flame of the gospel lit up as he discovered that we are set free by Christ, a gift of grace. When he posted the 95 theses at the church door in Wittenberg, he started them, quoting the Words of Jesus Christ. He knew: There is no other foundation than Jesus Christ. The flame of the gospel was again passed on.

But, just like in Corinth, soon various torch bearers were competing against each other. Europe saw terrible wars, where Christians killed each other. Almost half of Germany's population was wiped out a hundred years after the Reformation. But more terrible than these deaths was the fact that the gospel did not get spread to non-Christians during this time. The Christians were so busy fighting each other, killing each other's torches, that they did not dream of spreading the flame of Christ's love! It took more than two hundred years before the first Protestant Missionaries were sent out from the country of the Reformation. The descendants of those first missionaries are celebrating with us today: the Moravian Church.

As we celebrate today, we are painfully aware that the Corinthian battle is still ongoing - even within the Lutheran Family. As a family of Lutherans we share a substantial part of our doctrines and practises. Our "torches" look very much the same, the flame has a similar colour and smell. And yet we often do not succeed to "run together", so that outsiders might think that we are not connected at all. This is even more true when we look beyond the Lutheran family. All too often Churches fight a battle against each other, and seem to rejoice if the flame of the opponents is put out. The torches have become much more important than the flame.

The Apostle Paul today reminds us that we have a message to proclaim, a flame to carry, power to share that can transform people and societies.

We Christians owe it to our country and to our Lord to carry this flame of the love of God to the people.

A day like this, where "our torches come together" is a strong witness to the transforming power of Christ. The witness will become even stronger when we go home to our communities and recognise the other "torch bearers", fellow Christians from other denominations - Paul, Appolos, Peter or what ever their name might be - and greet them as brothers and sisters, when we combine our efforts to share this gospel. Rather than trying to extinguish the other's flame, let us assist another when the flame goes out.

Reformation is not a Lutheran celebration for Lutherans. It is a joyous proclamation that Christ is Lord and Saviour. It is a celebration that we have a flame to carry, a gospel to share!

On the altar today you see six candles - one for each of the Churches present here. The candles almost were not here. In the process of making them, various mishaps happened. Hot wax leaked out, leaving nothing in the mould. The cold weather resulted in some cracks. The idea was to have six identical candles, but eventually I had to make use of various forms to get six candles ready. None is like the other. None of them is perfect. But they all carry a flame from the same source, the candle at the cross. If we would darken this hall completely, you would see seven flames - the sizes and shapes of the candles would no longer be visible - only the original flame and the six that came from it.

Our country is quite dark at the moment. May our lights burn! May we bring the hope of Christ, each one with our own structures, shapes and challenges. The flame burns - despite all the flaws. The gospel is spread despite all the shortcomings of each one of us. This is only possible because of the power of the gospel, the dynamite of God's love!

Amen

Horst Müller, Bishop ELCSA (N-T), President of LUCSA Email: hmuller@elcsant.org.za