

Dear sisters and brothers,

today, is the last Sunday of the Advent season. In the last four weeks we had the possibility to prepare ourselves and our homes for Christmas, the arrival of Jesus Christ. It's a special time and some people call this season a "season of wonder, love and praise". That sounds so peaceful, calm and quite; and you can buy so many things, like candles, decoration- stuff, Christmas cookies, to create such a cosy and lovely atmosphere. And I wish my time of Advent would be more like that. But for me this time is also a time of stress and hurry. So many things have to be done at the end of the year. I feel a pressure to find perfect Christmas presents for all of my family and friends. And when I'm rushing through a shop, packed with people, I don't feel like being in a "season of wonder, love and praise".

Because of this I told myself at the beginning of Advent this year to arrange things better so that I can feel and experience this special time more intensively. And it almost worked out. I had some really quite and peaceful moments and unfortunately very busy times, too. Perhaps you made the same experience.

But why is this season so special? One reason could be that it is a joyful and happy celebration in a season that is dark and cold- at least in Germany. It's like a warming light that gives us hope for warmer and brighter days... Or it is so special because it's a moment of love. We show each other how important we are for one another by making presents, being nice and gathering.

I also think the time of Advent is a time of expectations. The root of the word "Advent" is a Latin word and it means arrival. We expect and we wait for the coming of Jesus Christ, God's Son. And there are a lot more hopes that are tied in with Christmas:

I have the expectation that this time has to be cosy, peaceful and quiet: burning candles, drinking tea, relaxing atmosphere with friends and family. For me this is really important. So for those who don't have family or no possibility to be with loved ones, these are probably lonely and sad days.

But there is also a bigger and deeper longing of all people for peace, love and justice especially in this season. Christmas is the time of donations; wars and fights will be stopped at least on the festive days. People who live in a peaceful and safe region can enjoy the season and for others the terror will start right after Christmas again.

In three days we will celebrate the coming of Jesus, his birth. He is the one of whom the angel said that he is the Saviour and Christ the Lord. We hope and pray that His kingdom of peace and justice that the Bible is talking about will be more and more established in our days. These are my hopes for Christmas every year.

Many expectations rest on Jesus Christ not only in our time. But even in the days of the Old Testament people were longing for the Messiah, the peacemaker. The Israelites often lived in fear and terror. Once, they were threatened by the Assyrians in the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. In this time the prophet Isaiah spoke following words of comfort to them (Isaiah 11: 1-5):

**"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord- and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath**

**of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.”**

It's a powerful text. It expresses many images how the Messiah will be like. It has given hope to the Israelites that one day everything will change and there will be justice and peace for everyone and especially for those who are oppressed. I think many of us can identify with the Israelites because it's exactly the same what we need today. We also need a hero, a mighty person, who will bring justice and peace.

But the character of the Messiah is given by the Spirit of God and it's not human or political power. The Spirit will rest on him forever and gives him the skills needed to reign: wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. They are important to fulfil his calling. He will need them to make the right decisions according to the will of God. Through him God will establish justice and righteousness on earth and on history. Since this time the Jewish people have been waiting for the Messiah. They have been waiting for God's kingdom of peace.

How do we imagine such a person?

I imagine an older man with a crown on his head sitting on a throne. He looks very gracious and he listens to the people who come to him with their needs. He is respected and adored by everyone. Some Hollywood movies are coming to my mind where a good and wise king fights against an evil one.

We as Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah who was sent to earth by his father in heaven. But God didn't fulfil the expectations of the people in these days. They waited for the Messiah to cast out the Roman oppressors. Perhaps they had the same images of a mighty and powerful king like me.

God didn't send a mighty hero, he did something totally different. The creator of heaven and earth came to the world as a child; he became one of the poor and oppressed people. And I can understand those who have hoped for God's care in a different, more powerful and impressive way.

God as a child shows that there is a new and tender beginning against all the harshness of life. It's a soft way how God gets in touch with the world. That's goes beyond our expectations.

There is a beautiful old choral, which we heard earlier in the service, and it is talking about this wonder of new beginning that was described by the Prophet Isaiah:

“Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung! Of Jesse's lineage coming, as those of old have sung. It came, a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night. Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind; with Mary we behold, the Virgin Mother kind. To show God's love aright, she bore to us a Saviour when half was spent the night. O Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air, dispel in glorious splendour the darkness everywhere. True man yet very God, from sin and death now save us, and share our every load.”

Isaiah and the choral are describing how a shoot, a flower will come up from a stump which nobody would expect. A stump is a part of a plant that is dead, where nothing grows anymore. Now there is a shoot growing, it's still small but it will grow and will bear fruits. The choral is talking about a rose that grows in winter. And that is odd and funny for me because roses are supposed to bloom in summer or autumn. The song makes clear that the event “Christmas” is something special. Doesn't that make you wonder?

It's the wonder of God becoming a man, a normal baby that needs pampers, a mummy and a daddy. God didn't fulfil the expectations of the people in coming like a big and powerful hero.

The song also describes that Jesus came in the middle of the night. In night we need a light that we may see something and to dispel our fears. God promised in the Old Testament that he will send someone to enlighten the dark. At Jesus' birth a big star was above the small stable in Bethlehem. And it was like a sign that showed the way to the

light of the world. The shepherds and magi [maigai], who followed the star, found the Saviour in the cradle.

Jesus brought light into many lives during his time on earth. He gave us the chance for unconditional relationship with God. Through his touch and affection he brightens up many eyes and lives.

Sometimes there are moments in my life, where everything seems to be in darkness. I feel like being in a long night without knowing when the dawn will come. These are moments when I feel alone, when I fail or when I don't have the strength for my daily duties. In such moments, there is the promise that God will come and that he will bring light into my night. God comes "when half was spent the night". God comes in the middle of my loneliness and my failure. He never comes too late.

But as we know roses have thorns and so for me the Christmas- story is more than a nice story with a cute small baby, angels, flocks and shepherds. In Jesus God became a man not only to show the world how much he loves it but also "to judge the needy with righteousness and to give decisions for the poor of the earth", as the Prophet Isaiah describes the skills of the Messiah. God came into action and in Jesus we can see it clearly. He was closely connected to righteousness and faithfulness. He didn't come to confirm the point of view of mighty and influential people. He showed the world God's sight of a good and meaningful life. Prestige, power and money are not important anymore. The love to God, to my neighbours and to me is the greatest commandment. Jesus turned the world and its core values upside down.

He cared for the outsider and he made them to sons and daughters of God. Not on account of their holiness and perfection in life but because of their confession and repentance.

This is the part of the story that challenges me to think about my life and to change the way of it. If Christmas is like a blooming rose bush in winter, the part that concerns my life is like the thorns of the bush. They could prick me if I will touch it. But if I don't dare to touch it in the risk of being pricked, I can't take the beautiful rose with me. So the challenge of Christmas is to make the Good News of God's love to the world the Good News of my own life. Every year we hear the same old story at Christmas, perhaps we even celebrate Christmas always in the same way. If I just take it as a good story and I don't relate it to my life, nothing will change. God comes to the world and he wants to be part of my world. The wonder of Bethlehem wants to take place in the heart of people and enlighten them.

I know that this is not always easy; the challenge is quite hard to be led by God's ideas of life. It changes my way, I'm not the centre of my world anymore. It's not about me but about God and about the people around me.

God's love makes me act in a different way. He hasn't only come to change my personal life, but he also enables me to change the life of other men and women. The Prophet Isaiah foretold that the Messiah will bring justice to the poor and judge the wicked. And Jesus acted exactly in this way.

I think the challenge for us Christians today is to follow Jesus' role model. We can't accept the circumstances in this world. We can't accept that the poor are becoming poorer everyday and the rich earn more and more money and resources. We have to do something against it. And that is one of the thorns of Christmas. It pricks me because I have to go out of my comfort zone. When Christmas becomes a part of my life nothing stays the same anymore.

And I try my best to act like that and often I fail and I'm disappointed of myself. It's hard to lay my interests aside. And so many times I try to manage it on my own. I forget that God wants to give me strength in everything I do.

So I'm glad to hear the Christmas story of God's love every year. It reminds me that there is a new chance to try again. I don't have to be perfect; in every failure there is the opportunity of a new tender beginning. A shoot came up from a stump, roses are blooming in winter: these are the signs to encourage me and let Jesus be born in my heart again and again.

I like to compare Christmas with a blooming rose bush in winter. I know it sounds a little bit funny but it shows to me how special Christmas is. Christmas is much more than I often have in mind.

I've seen so many blooming rose bushes so that when I pass by I'm not excited anymore. I might think: "Oh, it looks really nice and it smells so good!" But because it's ordinary I won't tell my friends about it. Christmas comes every year and it has always been a part of my life. So I don't wonder so much about it anymore.

In the last few days I passed quite a lot of blooming rose bushes. And they looked really nice with the snow on it. Actually I have never realized that there are roses in winter.

The choral helps me to get a new perspective of being surprised. Even if everything seems to be so familiar God can always go beyond my expectations.

And I pray for open eyes and an open mind to recognize all the wonders around me again. I realized that the beautiful nature, the snow we had in Reutlingen the last few weeks and the moments with friends and family are wonders in my life. They are so precious because I experienced God's love and care to me through them.

In the same way, I want to be excited about Christmas again.

The reason for all these wonders is that the Christmas story itself is full of wonder. It's the story of God's love that wants to be a part of my life. Even if God comes in a different way than we would expect it. He comes as a peacemaker and a king of the world in a tiny, absolutely human way. Jesus grew like a shoot until he reached his greatness. His fruits were passionate love to all around him and an obedient way of serving God. That's the way God's kingdom came into the world. And it's also the way how the kingdom of God will grow in and through us. We are a part of it, even in times when we feel unworthy and too powerless. But every time we let others know and feel the wonderful story of Jesus' birth, His kingdom will grow a little bit more.

This rose is from a bush in Reutlingen. It's a small present that wants to remind you that there is more about Christmas than a feast of wonder, love and praise. Christmas is like a blooming rose bush in winter with its beauty, its oddness and its thorns. Every year, it wants to remind us again that we are loved and challenged more than we'd ever expect. Amen.

### **Prayer:**

Gracious God, we thank you for the coming of Jesus long ago in Bethlehem, for his willingness to become like us, to die for us and to come to live with us again.

Make us ready to open our lives to his coming every day.

Help us to remember the gifts of Jesus' coming: how he fed the hungry, healed the sick, and freed us from fear.

Free us now to do his work.

Make our homes bright with joy of your presence and our churches alive with glad songs for your coming. Give us faces that shine your light for the world to see.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

