

Jesus Christ is Lord

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

2 Cor 4:1-6

Eighty-eight years ago, May 29-31, 1934, a group of Protestant leaders met in Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany. They thought something had to be done over against Hitler. Hitler had taken power in Germany in January 1933. All the legal rights and power of the church were made subject to the State. What was to be done about this? People began to worry. There were 138 in that group gathered in Barmen, Germany, to do something. They talked and talked.

Half-way through the second day, when everyone there did what Germans did in those days, that is, take a nap between 1:00 and 3:00, while everyone was napping, Karl Barth drank a strong cup of coffee and wrote what is called the Barmen Declaration. It is only a couple of pages long. Six main points. Scripture, what we hold, and what we reject.

The next day, with some very small changes, other people, like Bonhoeffer and Gollwitzer, signed it. What's significant is the fourth point, which says: "We have no other Führer. Remember Hitler was called the Führer. They said the only Führer we have is Jesus Christ. That was to stick a thumb in Hitler's eye.

It was a public statement that they were standing up against the State, that the Church is not run by the State, and as it says in Point #2: "There is no other Lord."

What's interesting is what then happened. Here is this small group out of seven and a half thousand Protestant preachers in Germany, a little group of 500, and their leaders were the 138 who met at Barmen.

As the pressures grew a couple of years later, the group split. Some of them worried about their pensions. Some were called to positions in the church and decided to play ball with the State Church. What remained was only this little group called the Confessing Church. At the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Barmen Confession in 1984, some looked back at this great event of the Confessing Church. Why was this all forgotten? There is a tiny Baptist paper in Atlanta that carried a notice about it. There was a committee in Geneva, Switzerland, that mentioned it. This really important event, the Barmen Declaration, is even included in the Book of the Reformed Confessions. But otherwise it is forgotten.

We ask: Why? Why is this event which is so magnificent and important, forgotten? Why is it that nobody bothers?

What happened in the Barmen Declaration is similar to what happened to the Apostle Paul. Today the text is 2 Cor 4:1-6. The whole book of 2 Corinthians is Paul defending himself. Corinth was a mess, the cesspool of the Mediterranean World. And this little congregation in Corinth was itself a mess.

Paul was under attack. As Paul himself said: "Well, I'm not very great of stature." So he must have been short. There's some indication that he stuttered. He may have had epilepsy or bad eyesight. He was not a good speaker. Furthermore, he didn't seem to carry much authority among the leaders of the church. They doubted whether he was **really** an apostle. After all, he wasn't one of the Twelve. Although he's called an apostle. In Acts 14:4 Barnabas and Paul are called apostles. In 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 Paul writes a list of witnesses to the resurrection, and at the end he adds: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:8).

But the leaders made fun of him. He called them the super-apostles. They didn't think he really counted. And you recall they divided the work between those who went to the Jews and those who went to the Gentiles. That agreement is spelled out in Galatians 2 and Acts 15, but people fudged. After all, there were places where there were both Jews and Gentiles. For example, in Gal 2:4 the Judaizers sneaked in and tried to undermine Paul's work. They said about Paul: "You don't do mighty works. You don't carry the day."

What did Paul do as he faced this? He defends himself in an unusual way in 2 Cor 11:17-18: "Many boast of worldly things, so I will boast, too." He writes that he's going to boast in an ironic way, as a fool or madman.

He writes: "Whatever anyone dares to boast of . . . I also dare to boast of that" (2 Cor 11: 21b). He goes on:

"Of course if you are going to boast about being Hebrew, I'm Hebrew. About being an Israelite, I'm an Israelite. Being a descendent of Abraham, so am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments with countless beatings. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I have been beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked. A day and night I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger

from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. . . . ”

He could have boasted about having a vision on the road to Damascus. That would have been impressive. But no, as he writes in 2 Cor 11:30: “If I must boast, I’ll boast of my weaknesses.”

Although the letters of Paul were collected and kept in our collection of books, what we know from church history is that for the first three hundred years, until the time of Augustine, Paul was basically ignored. He was there, but John or Matthew or Hebrews was what was considered important. It’s one of the curious parts of early church history. Paul didn’t cut the mustard. Just like the Barmen Declaration.

People start forgetting about Barmen. What was it that they said in the Barmen Declaration: There is one Lord Jesus. Only one Führer. That was directly against the Nazis, just like Paul. In 2 Cor 4:5: “For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.” Jesus Christ is Lord. That’s the basic Christian confession. We find it in 1 Cor 12:3, Romans 10:9, Philippians 2:11, and indirectly other places.

Jesus is Lord! How is that important? It’s not seen because Paul was a great success or that Paul didn’t have troubles. The magnificent thing about this book of defense, 2 Corinthians, is how it describes what the Gospel is about. It’s about his failure and his defeat. In 2 Cor 1:4: “Jesus Christ comforts us in all our afflictions so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

What is the comfort? The comfort is that he could waive his authority and could say as he does in 2 Cor 12:12: “I can do more and bigger miracles than they do.” But he doesn’t claim that. He could also claim that vision, but he says, I’m not claiming that.

2 Cor 1:8-10 is a short passage that is one of the most remarkable statements of what this Gospel is about. Paul writes:

“For we do not want you to be ignorant of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on our own selves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so

deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope he will deliver us again.”

We don't know the circumstances Paul was in. There's no place in Acts or Paul that tells us. We know only his description of what it was:

“We were so unbearably, utterly crushed, we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on our own selves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us and he will deliver us. On him we set our hope that he will deliver us again.”

At the end of this little book of 2 Corinthians, Paul says he has “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to harass me” (2 Cor. 12:7). We don't know what the thorn was. It may have been epilepsy or whatever. And he prayed that the Lord would take it away. He says: “Three times I prayed that the Lord would take it away.” And the answer comes in 12:9-10: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul responds:

“I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9b-10).

That's something entirely different than raising one's fist or playing power games. Rather: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

What is that referring to? We again know from this same book in the first chapter, 1:20: “All the promises of God find their yes in him.” That is parallel to Psalm 81:10: “I am the Lord your God open your mouth wide and I will fill it.”

How does that work? 2 Cor 4:3: “Even if our gospel is veiled it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the likeness of God.” Then comes our passage 2 Cor 4:5: “For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.” And then comes 2 Cor 4:6: “For it was the God who said: ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Paul is suspicious about the light. In the same book, 2 Cor 11:14 is a passage Luther quoted often: “Remember, the Devil disguises himself as an angel of light.”

What is the light? That's why what this verse ahead of verse 2 Cor 4:4 is so important. It's the light of the Gospel, which means that Jesus Christ died and rose for you and me. It includes the light of what God has done in weakness. And then his restoration in the resurrection. Jesus is Lord.

We recall that great chorus in Handel's Messiah: "Lord of lords and King of kings!" You may have thought Handel invented that, but he was simply picking up those things which are found frequently, not only in this confession: "Jesus is Lord," but in 1 Timothy 6:15: "The only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords," and Revelation 17:14: "[the Lamb] is the Lord of lords and King of kings." This is found frequently in the Old Testament, too, as we find in Deuteronomy 10:17: "The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribes."

We ask ourselves not: Where is success over against failure? Look at the Barmen Confession. Look at Paul's failures, at least for the first few centuries. "God works in his mysterious ways . . . ."

We remember the basic confession: "Jesus Christ is Lord." That means he is the God of gods, the Lord of lords. And everything is done with the light of the glory of God in Him. Amen