



Predigt anlässlich der Vertragsunterzeichnung der Kirchenpartnerschaft mit Skara über Johannes 1, 29-34 am 18. Juni 2022



Dear sisters and brothers in Skara,

the story of the encounter of John the Baptist with Jesus, which the gospel of John reports to us this morning is a beautiful story. It is a beautiful story after two days of community between you in the diocese of Skara and us as a delegation of the Bavarian Lutheran church. We have exchanged with each other about our mission for the church and for the world and we have felt the fellowship, developed through the years in our partnership. But we also have asked many questions about what carries us in our mission.

The story speaks right into the middle of these questions, because it gives a clear answer where the solid ground for us is. The people at the time of Jesus needed orientation just like us today. It sometimes seems so overwhelming when we listen to the news in these days. The Russian attack against the Ukraine has led to immense suffering. Images of war atrocities have shattered the belief in a stable minimum of common moral ground in Europe and between the states in this region of the world. Many of us are torn between the desire to overcome military dynamics in dealing with conflicts on one side and effectively protecting the victims of the Russian aggression by military support on the other side. We need orientation for the world!

At the same time we need orientation for the church! Within decades the many century old central role of the church for the social cohesion of society has eroded. In a pluralistic society the church cannot base its relevance on this historical role anymore but needs to make plausible to the people why the gospel is not some old tradition, which has lost its relevance, but more timely than ever! How can young people rediscover the church as a home and a space for life orientation and a source for regeneration!

Dear sisters and brothers,

I firmly believe that today's story from the gospel of John gives us the key for a response to these questions. The people at the time of John the Baptist were shattered in their traditional normative and spiritual grounds. The Roman Empire had shown its violent face. The religious authorities of their time did not provide the guidance people needed. The people around John the Baptist felt deep in their heart that something new had to come, that the world they lived in had moved away from its god given destiny and that they had to open their hearts to a new thinking and to a new living. And they listened and tried to understand what God wanted to tell them and where God wanted them to go with their lives. They had again and again heard those old stories, told everywhere in Israel, about the messiah who would renew Israel and its people and lead them into a new age of peace and justice which would sometime include all the peoples of this earth. And they wondered: who is this messiah? Is he already among us? Or will he come? And when will he come?

So when they heard John the Baptist preach in the desert about the kingdom of God being near and about the repentance that each and everyone had to show in preparation of the messiah's arrival, they thought: Maybe this John, this powerful preacher who makes everybody shiver with his words, maybe he is the promised messiah who will liberate us and open a new life.

But John the Baptist says: "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." It is an act of wise self-limitation that John the Baptist resists the temptation to acknowledge peoples' perception that he was the messiah.

John says: No. I am not. I am just a preacher in the desert. I am baptizing you with water and I am calling you to repentance. But with this spiritual leadership I am pointing to somebody else. All my efforts to minister for you, to call you back to God, are not about me. They are about somebody else I am only pointing to. I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful

than me is coming; I baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! With him the fate of the world changes. The world is not doomed in darkness but destined to a new heaven and a new earth in which every tear will be wiped from their eyes, in which death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

John has understood what fundamental change Jesus meant for this world. He says to the people of his time: Look at this man. You will experience something you have never experienced before. You will see and feel the presence of God in him. He might not be as you imagined him, not as sweet, maybe not as earthly powerful as you thought, maybe not as comfortable as you might have expected. But you will sense deep in your soul that he is the way and that he is the truth and that he is the life. And you can become part of this fundamental and beautiful turn in the world by becoming baptized. By experiencing this powerful coming together of water and spirit. I baptize you with water. But if you belong to Jesus, if you are baptized in Jesus, the water will connect you with the Holy Spirit, you will experience the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, and it will be with you always, to the end of the age.

John the Baptist, says today's scripture, testified: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" The gospel of Luke, in its account of the same scene, reports what happens after John the Baptist has spoken and then baptized Jesus and many more people:

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I see this as a beautiful image of what happens when we are baptized just as Jesus was baptized: The heaven was opened! What an amazing image! What a powerful sign! What a wonderful eye opener for you and me and for all of our future! God says: "Look at this man, Jesus! Stay with him and listen to him, and you will have my presence with you now and forever!" That is what this story tells us, and that is why heaven opens. Heaven opens for Jesus and heaven opens for all of us who go along with Jesus. Jesus opens the experience of the Holy Spirit for all of us. As we are baptized, God's voice from heaven to Jesus becomes God's voice to us all. The voice from heaven says: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This sentence, spoken to Jesus, and through Jesus to all of us, makes the one big difference in our lives. It makes your and my life bright and gives it a solid basis that nothing and nobody can ever destroy anymore. Because we know and understand deep in our heart that we are God's beautiful children and God is with us and accompanies us and strengthens us today and every day of our life.

When I hear this, when I believe it, when I think of my baptism as a visible sign for it, I feel a great freedom. I feel a great connectedness with all my brothers and sisters in Christ. I feel a great connectedness with all the people who are created in the image of God just like me. I felt this connectedness in the past days here in Skara. And I feel it this morning as we celebrate our worship here in the cathedral

Can we be a sign for the world, can we be salt of the earth and light for the world, connected with Christ and with each other through our baptism?

Yes, we can! I have seen so many examples – whether in Sweden or in Bavaria or in other places! Like the project „Open Skona“, to which I have been introduced recently in Malmö, initiated by Archbishop Antje Jackelen together with the South Swedish Chamber of Commerce and which enables young refugees to work in business. Or the Pangani children's center in Nairobi, which I have visited recently, where the Lutheran Church of Kenya in cooperation with our Bavarian Lutheran Church gives street children a new home and accompanies them with good school education, in some cases leading even to university.

And, yes, we can be a sign for the world also in public life. By treating refugees coming to our countries with dignity. By effectively helping to protect people from aggressive acts of war like in the Ukraine and at the same time never buying into any celebration of military means but continuously striving towards ways to overcome violence and foster a just peace.

Dear brothers and sisters,

John the Baptist – in his search for God's very presence – had clear directions: "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." With these directions, he found what he was looking for. And together with him we today can all find what we are looking for.

Through our baptism we are connected with Christ forever in faith. Through our baptism we are inspired for a new life in love. Through our baptism our prospect to the future is not darkness but light, so we can live in hope.

John the Baptist is our witness: Heaven is wide open for us. What better basis can there be for a fulfilled and meaningful life here on earth!

AMEN