

**Sermon at the Opening Service on 30 April:
... Strong ...**

**Laura Brand, Jens Krieger-Juhnke, Ralf Meister
Platz der Menschenrechte/ Human Rights Square**

I Dealing with mass and might

Laura: Wow, when I look around I'm overwhelmed by how many we are. That is fantastic. It is wonderful to see you all here – I'm really moved!

Ralf: Kirchentag in Hanover! It is impressive when so many people come together. That's a strong sign. It sends a strong message.

Jens: That is really great – I last saw so many people at one time at a demonstration against the far right. They were at exactly the same place where the other opening service is now, at Opera Square. And there too I found it really encouraging that so many people had gone into the street for a good cause. The same as today.

Ralf: I was there, too. And you're right: that sent a strong signal because, as in so many places in Germany, people were demonstrating in the streets for democracy here too. That was great. We need a whole lot of strength and positive enthusiasm from millions of people to make this world a better place. But the great enthusiasm of crowds can also tip the other way. At that demo thousands suddenly yelled: "All of Hanover hates the AfD." Then I thought: Hey, something's going wrong here, isn't it?!

Jens: *interrupts*: Ralf, wait a minute please – we went into the streets to protest against hate! Tens of thousands of people turned out with courage, strength and resolution because they wanted something good. Just like the people here today.

Ralf: I thought that was right, too. Naturally I'm not in favour of the AfD. But I have problems with the word "hate". Hate, regardless for whom, does not help! Hate is not a strong sign. Hate is the opposite of courageous, strong, resolute. Hate is precisely what is now massively influencing political debates, actually destroying them. And we have witnessed the way hate slogans can very rapidly be directed against others.

Jens: OK, I see what you mean. But you also have to see that the big demos were expressing support for a vibrant democracy. For everyone marginalised by the hate expressed by the hard right. For diversity. That's really great!

Laura: Wait a minute, Jens. Face the facts. It's a kind of illusion to think that demonstrations definitely change something.

II Strength and weakness

Laura: When I look at the world situation I see that a very old image of strength is asserting itself. Uncertainty is increasing, anxiety prevails, so we have to equip ourselves, "re-arm" ourselves mentally and with arguments. Two of the mightiest states in the world are governed by men who rely on the "law of the strongest". But I could talk for hours about what is going wrong here in this country! *(short pause)*

Ralf to Jens: Jens, tell us what strength means for you?

Jens: I belong to a sports team – I'm currently spending a year volunteering at a Physics Institute here in Hanover. It's terribly important there to constantly talk with others. "Hey, have you already had problem XYZ? What did you do about it?" And it's like that when volunteering as well. When I'm out with the team I know I can rely on the others. They cover for me when I can't perform as well as they do. I sense trust, strength and that we are on the road together... being strong doesn't mean to me that I am never unsure of myself. – How do you see it, Laura?

Laura: Hm...that's an important question... I was strong when I had no other choice. A personal story occurs to me first, it's really a private matter. My mother got cancer – in the middle of Covid when I was in final year at high school. That didn't match up but I wanted to be strong for my mother, because she was suffering so much. And in the end, I got Covid myself, as one of the first in our village. I could only talk to my family through the closed balcony door. It was absolutely not clear whether I was going to be able to sit the final exams or not. It was a difficult time, but now I know: we were incredibly strong when we were really weak.

Ralf: And what helped you?

Laura: What helped me was that my family held together in that way. Regardless of the situation, we all had the feeling: “We’ll manage together” – just like you have just described with your team, Jens. I am absolutely grateful that friends, teachers, the neighbours and our local congregation supported us so much. And then there was my faith. The trust that someone is there who sees our family and me. I simply trusted that better times would come. I prayed for that every day. *(short pause)*

Today I’m grateful that everything turned out well.

III God’s strength

Ralf: I find your experience incredibly moving. A strong story though it tells of great weakness. It’s one of these great stories that, again and again, raise the why-question which we human beings can’t answer. Where is “almighty God”?

For almost two millennia God’s omnipotence played the main role, as we have just recited in the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty...” When you think of almighty God you think automatically of strength. Yes, we attribute the greatest strength to God.

But we sense in what we experience every day that this world does not reflect God’s omnipotence, more God’s powerlessness. We all contribute strongly to creating this impression. We are often not courageous and resolute enough. More hesitant and reluctant. Or the opposite happens: In our churches, we have devastating examples of abuse of power.

Jens: Exactly, Ralf, and continuing to address that will be an ongoing issue. We are far from having finished with it in the church! We can’t talk about power and omnipotence without facing the challenge that comes with it. I can only make something of “almighty God” if I’m clear in my mind: Jesus is mentioned in the creed, as well. And his story is a story of weakness, not of strength.

Laura: Well, the story is pretty impressive.

Jens: But his way was different from the strength of the “heavenly hosts” ... Jesus turned to vulnerable persons and placed them in the centre of attention. He encouraged people who had been deprived of their dignity. He strengthened those who were on the margins. And he demonstrated to us how that can work. With Jesus,

God gave up some of God's omnipotence so that we take action ourselves. For instance, about the climate.

Ralf: God's strength is that God makes us strong for changes. Like the Kirchentag theme, like Paul wrote: courageous – strong – resolute. Just as we heard a moment ago when it was read in different languages: "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." We can do that: be both strong and weak. Doing and not doing things, because we have a God who knows about both: being strong and being weak. Descending into hell (to the dead) and rising again. Good Friday and Easter. That's why holding a Kirchentag directly after Easter is especially encouraging for me. Kirchentag is the energy of many, many people who do not fold their hands in their laps, but set out to make the world a more just place. That's why, for me, Kirchentag means that we live in the promise that this world can be changed for the better under God's will.

Jens: For me, Kirchentag means gathering strength and becoming strong, enjoying the community we can experience here, and networking with people.

Laura: For me, Kirchentag means: resolutely living in hope, so that others can catch our enthusiasm.

Amen