

ALL!

22 September 1957

O Lord, our God! Thou wilt that men, including us in this house today, hear thy word of comfort and exhortation, call on thee and praise thy name. Thou hast so decided in thy undeserved kindness. For what are we before thee and for thee? But thou hast called us, and we have heard thy call. And now we are assembled here: thy creatures in all the weakness, darkness and rebellion that is ours; thy children whom thou lovest even though we scarcely love thee and certainly do not love thee rightly; thy congregation, a strange crowd here as everywhere in the world. Yet thou wilt be present and at work in our midst.

Because we utterly depend on thy care we wait for thee, for thy good and Holy Spirit and his gifts. Brighten this hour, let it be pleasing in thy sight, and helpful and fruitful for us! Grant that our human doings, our prayers, our sermon, and our hymns, bespeak power and truth, come from heart and go to heart. Be thou our master, our teacher, our mighty and good Lord over all thoughts that move each one of us in this hour of worship.

In the name of thy dear Son in whom thou hast shown us and wilt evermore show us thy free grace, we pray as he has prayed before us, 'Our Father . . .'

For God has made all men prisoners, that he may have mercy upon all.

ROMANS II.32

MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, you have surely noticed right away that our text is not very easy to understand. I frankly confess that I myself, having read time and again Paul's letter to the Romans in the course of my rather long life, am still wrestling with these words, as with so many passages of this letter and of the entire Bible. The text stimulates my thinking ever anew. I am certain that in it, like in a very hard shell, there lies hidden a most precious pearl. May God let me give you a glimpse of what it means!

'*That he may have mercy on all!*' This second phrase shall be our starting point. It looks like a mountain which we cannot climb, in our thoughts or in a sermon—a mountain from which we can only climb down. The apostle Paul himself could not have started out with the affirmation that 'God has made all men prisoners' had he not first and foremost known and pondered the affirmation 'that he may have mercy upon all'. We, too, must begin with this second phrase.

We would indeed forget Christmas, Good Friday and Easter, we would dismiss Jesus Christ himself, were we not to follow this order. He who knows Jesus knows that it is both impossible to dismiss him, and imperative to begin at all times in our thoughts and in our life with him, and with him alone, just as the alphabet has no other beginning than the letter A. We must start with the fact that God had mercy and will have mercy on all—that his will and work are determined and governed by his compassion. This he proved in Jesus Christ not only by words, but by the mightiest of his deeds. He gave himself for us in his dear Son and became man, our brother. This is the mighty deed and through it the word of God's mercy on all has been spoken. We may and we must stick to this truth and ever anew begin with it.

God has mercy on us. He says 'yes' to us, he wills to be on our side, to be our God against all odds. Indeed against all odds, because we do not deserve this mercy, because, as we rightly suppose, he should say 'no' to us all. But he does not say 'no'; he says 'yes'. He is not against us; he is for us. This is God's mercy.

Contrary to human mercy even in its kindest expression, God's mercy is almighty. It is almightily saving and helpful. It brings light, peace and joy. We need not be afraid that it might be limited or have strings attached. His 'yes' is unequivocal, never to be reversed into 'no'.

Since God's mercy is divine and not human, it is poured out on all men, as emphasized in our text. In his letter to the Romans Paul interprets this mercy by insisting that it is extended to the Jews *and* the Gentiles—to those near, or at least nearer, to God and to those far away from him—to the so-called pious and the so-called unbelievers—to the so-called good and the so-called evil people—truly to *all*. God has mercy on all, though on each one in his own way. God's mercy is such as it is described in the parable of the lost sheep, of the lost coin, and of the prodigal son.

Let us pause here for a moment. As according to God's holy word, spoken in Jesus Christ, he has mercy on all, each one of you may and shall repeat—not after me, but after him—'I am one of them'. God has mercy on me and will have mercy on me. The one great sin for anyone right now would be to think: 'This is not meant for me. God does not have mercy on me and will not have mercy on me.' Or even worse: 'I do not need mercy. I do not want it!' This would be the one great sin which we had rather not commit this morning. God has mercy on all, including you and me. As a result you and I may and shall live from this 'yes' spoken to all men, spoken to us, and live here and now!

But wait a minute! Because according to the word that God has spoken in Jesus Christ he has mercy on all, we may and we

must repeat in our hearts: 'Among all people on whom God has mercy are this man and that woman, this fellow-creature beside me, in front of me or behind, whom I don't like to remember. Perhaps he did me wrong, or I am not pleased with him for other reasons. Perhaps I must even consider him as my enemy, and myself as his enemy.' God has mercy on all—even on this other fellow! His 'yes' is valid also for him. The one great sin from which we shall try to escape this morning is to exclude anyone from the 'yes' of God's mercy. In our thoughts, words and deeds we may live, and we must live, with each neighbour as with one to whom God is compassionate. We not only pray 'Lord, have mercy on me!' We also pray 'Lord have mercy on us, have mercy on us all!' This has been the prayer of the Christian Church from the very beginning, and this is the true prayer for us today.

This is what needs very briefly to be said about God's mercy. This is the height from which we may proceed, come what may.

But from these heights we are asked to descend into the depths of what we have heard. That he may have mercy on all, *God has made all men prisoners of disobedience*. Prisoners! I may dispense with explaining the most obvious meaning of this term in a house where there are so many closed doors. But man may be a prisoner of quite different and much worse kind than you are here. Prisoner of a sorrow that once befell him and now poisons his heart and life! Prisoner of resentment, anger or hatred, perhaps rightfully directed against some people who gave him offence! Prisoner of a dismal tendency or habit which since his younger days he has been unable to shake off! Prisoner of a depressing illness of the body, like the people in the hospital over there! Quite a large number of our contemporaries are prisoners of mutual distrust, of the bitter feud between East and West, between the so-called 'free world' and the world of

so-called 'socialism'. And all of us may feel like prisoners of anxiety, of the great and truly frightening fear of a third world war and of the bombs that people intend to drop on each other on that occasion. Lastly—I could have mentioned it first—we are all prisoners of the limitations of our one and only life, which is so short, prisoners of the limitations of our birth and our approaching death.

Nevertheless, these prisoners of various kinds are locked up behind doors that may open one day, that already have slits through which they can peek. Man even manages, at least in his thoughts, to dispel the harsh fact that he must die.

There remains, however, one prison whose door has no slits or peeping holes. 'God has made all men prisoners of disobedience.' What does this mean? What kind of imprisonment is this?

We are all prisoners because God in his infallible knowledge knows who and what we are, and by his unmistakable word reveals our true being as fundamentally disobedient. Not only disobedient to parents and teachers and superiors, as we were often enough in our youth; nor disobedient to human custom and human law, or to our own conscience. True, we all were and still are disobedient in this respect, even though not evenly, not altogether, and not ultimately. But God knows and tell us—this is the imprisonment—that we are disobedient *before him* and *to him*. What does this mean?

It does not necessarily imply that one has to be an atheist who straightforwardly thinks and affirms that there is no God. I dare say there are very few such outspoken atheists, and these may not even be of the worst kind. Disobeying God means, whether we believe in him or not, that we let him be the 'man upstairs' and reserve for ourselves, in our hearts and minds and lives, the right to go our own ways. Disobeying God means that we affirm in our innermost hearts and with our outward life that there is no God. This is precisely what we are doing all the time.

It is the disobedience, the rebellion and revolt, the attempt at an impossible ascent in the mountains. He who tries the impossible makes himself impossible, and is doomed to perish. God knows that we attempt the impossible, that we are these foolish mountain-climbers, and he tells us so. This is the door without slits on which we pound in vain. There is no denial of our ultimate disobedience. It is as true as God is God and man is man.

The text insists that God has made *all* men prisoners of disobedience. *All*, including me, the preacher of this Sunday sermon? Yes, including me! Including the good or at least the better fellows among you? Yes, including them! Including the best people that ever lived or may live on earth? Yes, including these! The all-knowing God declares that all, each one in his own way, yet each and all, are prisoners of disobedience.

We must again pause for a moment. Because this is our common predicament, none shall secretly exempt himself; none shall point to the other fellow as a more obvious target; none shall think of himself as an exception, if only a half-exception or a quarter-exception. My brothers and sisters, everything depends on our readiness not to escape at this point. Not only because there is no escape—but because an escape would work to our disadvantage. Our peace and our joy, our salvation in time and eternity are here determined. We are not to deny, but to acknowledge, not to mutiny against, but to confess: God has made me and you *prisoners of disobedience*.

God's purpose is not to debase us nor to put us to shame. I repeat: God is not against us, he is for us. As a great saint has rightly put it, the Saviour is no kill-joy. The arms of his eternal love, if I may say so, are already outstretched when he makes us *prisoners of disobedience*. He does so in order to have mercy on all. He keeps us, the prisoners of disobedience, together like a shepherd his flock. He keeps us in line and holds us in check. He places us on the very spot where his mercy is operative and

manifest, he gathers us as his people, transfers us into a community of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For he has made Jesus Christ our Saviour by delivering his own beloved and obedient Son to disobedience and death in our place. 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin', says the apostle Paul elsewhere, in an equally difficult passage. And Jesus Christ was obedient to God by not rebelling against his will, but by submitting to it. We are called to belong to him, to share in God's eternal mercy poured out in him, to rejoice in our salvation through him, and to live in the power of this mercy and this salvation. Therefore, we have no other choice but to submit to God's design to make us all prisoners of disobedience.

This leads us, in conclusion, to some questions and their answers.

You yearn for new courage, for courage to be? You may and even ought to do so. True courage to be is the courage to be humble, consciously to participate in the divine mercy as a prisoner of disobedience. Thus you become and remain a courageous man.

You yearn for your right? All of us yearn for our rights! And you shall obtain it from God and before God, even though you are wrong before men and in your own conscience. But you will become aware of your right before God at the very moment you confess, without reservation and in complete honesty, to be wrong before this very God.

You yearn to rise again? This also is legitimate and appropriate. But I have to ask you one other question: Did you ever reach the depth? Not only the depth of any inward or outward misery, but the depth where man must acknowledge that he can no longer help himself, that no man can help him, that there is absolutely no help save God's mercy? In this depth, God's mercy has already reached out for you, has already found you, and you will experience that it will lift you to the highest heights.

Finally, *you yearn for joy?* Yes, we all yearn for joy, and rightly

so. Real, lasting joy has a very quiet, unobtrusive and hidden beginning. Joy is born when you renounce any attempt to be something more than one among all those whom God has made prisoners of disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Joy is born when you submit to both God's mercy and God's imprisoning, without resistance. Amen.

God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost! Forbid that we depart without thy loving and severe word accompanying us, each one to his place; into his particular experiences, concerns, sorrows and expectations, into this Sunday and into this coming week! Be and remain present and at work in this house, and with all its inmates. Restrain all evil spirits which threaten to overpower us! Keep the light burning which so often is about to go out.

We ask this for all people gathered today in thy name here and elsewhere, and for the world in need of a courageous, clear and joyful Christian witness. We commend to thy faithfulness in particular our loved ones. We ask thee to grant wisdom to the powerful of this world who are in charge of keeping justice and peace on thy behalf; sober vision to those who day by day write our newspapers; love and perseverance to all parents and teachers; joyful forbearance in all families and homes; open, brotherly hearts and hands towards the poor and the lonely; relief and patience for the sick; hope of eternal life for the dying.

We are thankful that we may bring all these our concerns before thee, who knowest much better than we do what we need, and what is best for thy struggling Church and for the bewildered world; thou canst help and wilt help far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

We are in thy hand. We bend under thy judgment and we praise thy mercy. Amen.