

**Service on the occasion of the inauguration of
Superintendent Reverend Dr. Helmut Kirschstein
As Chairman of Gossner Mission**

On January 6th, 2022,

At the Französische Friedrichstadtkirche in Berlin / Germany

Sermon held by Dr. Helmut Kirschstein

Dear mission community,

Fear is not a good counsellor. King Mwanga II, as we were told during the visit of our Gossner delegation to Uganda six weeks ago – Mwanga II, Kabaka of Buganda, was afraid in 1886. He had learned that more and more young people in his royal court were worshipping another king. Apparently, these "Christians" wanted nothing more than the kingdom of another ruler. Yes, they even prayed for it daily: *Thy kingdom come...* Mwanga II feared for his throne – and had all suspects arrested, tried, brutally mutilated and executed. 22 Catholics and 23 Anglicans died, and their martyrdom is still very much on the minds of the people in Uganda today: both the Catholics, who have set up the largest place of pilgrimage in Africa for this purpose and proudly point to the visit of three popes, and the Anglicans depict the bloody events in their memorials. Limbs are amputated and the mutilated are dragged along the ground, bodies are pierced and heads cut off, corpses and the living are burnt together at the stake. It can't get more drastic than this, and both large churches are keen on this clarity – the original history of Christianity in Uganda tells not only of the fear of a brutal ruler, but also of the indomitable courage of true Christians.

Whether we in the calmer climes of our European liberalism can turn up our noses at this? It is a bizarre story, a grotesque misunderstanding, one might think, which serves as a justification for the cruel action of the ruler: *Thy kingdom come...*

And yet, I asked myself: Has this Kabaka not rightly sensed that the rule that had been prayed for by those Christians would limit his own power? That at least his fantasies of omnipotence would come to an end here, that he would have to give an account of his own actions to someone else, someone greater? And that in this longed-for, prayed-for "kingdom of God", fundamentally different values applied – values that radically questioned him?

Perhaps Mwanga II, in his bloodthirstiness, was more aware of the consequences of Christian life than most baptised people in our country. *Thy kingdom come...* Millions of people say this Sunday after Sunday, many of us certainly also during the week, day after day: out of an honest longing for a different rule, for a different system of values, critical of everything that is common? How serious can that be?

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Thy kingdom come... The one to whom we owe these words has sketched out the elementary outlines of this "kingdom" more than once, at least disturbingly, if not revolutionarily, for if it were up to him, hardly a stone would be left unturned of the old world order:

Blessed are those who are kind from the heart. For they will be filled.

Blessed are those who are merciful. For they will be treated mercifully.

Blessed are the peacemakers. For they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because they stand up for God's justice. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when they insult you, persecute you and revile you, because you belong to me. Rejoice and be glad! For your reward in heaven is great!

Heavenly reward for earthly losers? Now that would be an announcement! That *is* an announcement. We rarely hear it in our churches lately. For there is a flip side to all this: If the losers triumph in the end, the unkind egoists may fall by the wayside: the unmerciful rulers, the hate promoters and warmongers, the exploiters and neo-capitalists, who knows: even the cool and career-hungry, the materialists and hedonists and self-proclaimed supermen. Yes, where are the – godless? Forever *un-blessed*?

First of all, this is a secondary question, I think, secondary for those who are here and now, for God's sake, being insulted as "do-gooders". Or literally persecuted and imprisoned. They have enough to do with letting the divine promise of bliss sink in. Rubbing their eyes in wonder, perhaps: Hard to believe – we are meant! Indeed: **You are the salt of the earth**, Jesus tells them. **You are the light of the world**. Blessed ones: Philanthropic peacemakers. Merciful messengers of justice.

It is you who are literally taken into prayer by Jesus himself: *Together with him*, you may open your hearts to your common **father in heaven**. *Together with him*, you may stand up for his holy name. *Together with him*, you may stand up for his will – and for his kingdom to come: a kingdom of world-spanning justice, a kingdom of divine esteem for every single human being. Blessed ones, his call is to you: **Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and 'all else' will be yours.**

A *call for orientation*. For people who see in Jesus the way, the truth and the life anyway. A call for orientation, not an appeal that would have to overwhelm anyone. Just a hint to all those whom Jesus Christ calls "blessed": You are on the right path! Just continue to set this *priority*! **Seek first the kingdom of God**. Everything else will fall into place.

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A dangerous setting of priorities. Sometimes it is a matter of life and death. Whether the young Christians whom Mwanga II had executed in such a brutal way counted themselves among the lucky ones? If that doesn't sound cynical: They deserved it ... More difficult to answer is the question of whether we can count ourselves among these blessed ones – among the philanthropic peacemakers, among the merciful messengers of his justice – we who belong to two *mission societies* so rich in tradition. Is the kingdom of God our mission? Do we still see ourselves as *missionaries* of his justice? There are many who think that we should remove the concept of mission from our Christian repertoire altogether ...

No mission: no invitation to childlike trust in God *against* the powers of this world – no offensive encouragement to hope for good powers against all appearances – no building up of committed congregations that stand up for others in Jesus' name – no releasing dependent people from contexts of cultural oppression – no call to pray together with others for a better world and to work for a better world? What would then be left of the Christian faith? A kind of mystical self-indulgence? A kind of spiritual masturbation? A kind of indifferenciation of all essential beliefs? A kind of religious whitewashing of untenable conditions?

But then consistently: Without the idea of mission, we can delete the Lord's prayer without replacement! For everyone who prays the Lord's prayer speaks himself into the mission and speaks himself out for God's mission in this world. *Everything everything everything* must change: *Your name alone* shall be holy to people, good God, not the names of Apple and Google and Amazon, of VW and Mercedes-Benz, not the names of capitalism, nor those of communism and all the systems that despise humanity, **hallowed be your name!** For the good of all humanity and for the salvation of every single human being: *this mission!*

Your kingdom come – the reign of the human God: human dignity and human rights, peace for the maltreated creation, eternal hope for all. For the good of all humanity and the salvation of every single human being: *this mission!*

Your will be done – the will to reconcile heaven and earth, the will for the equal coexistence of men and women and diverse people, young and old and ancient, healthy and terminally ill, the will for the common life of all: from beautiful models and athletes bursting with strength to the most severely impaired in body and soul. For the good of all humanity and for the salvation of every single human being: *this mission!*

For this mission we pray. This is the mission we set in motion with our prayers. Whoever prays in this way – we have all learnt this at some point – whoever prays cannot only wish for something from God – whoever prays moves with word and deed on the path mentioned: **Hallowed be your name** can only mean: I hope in you, God – and do everything *so that* your name *is* hallowed! **Your kingdom come** can therefore only mean: I hope in you, God – and yet also do everything myself *so that* your kingdom *is* realised! **Your will be done** can therefore only mean: I hope completely in you, God – and yet, of course, do not lay my hands in my lap, but do with heart and mind and hand and foot everything that is possible

for me so *that* your will is done in this world. Our mission is the mission that Jesus Christ asks us to pray for: His mission is called "kingdom of God". And so is our mission.

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Under the heading "Our Mission Focus", Godfrey Loum, the new Bishop of Gulu, addresses the urgent need for "trauma healing" in his diocese – here in northern Uganda, marauding Lord's Resistance Army troops have terrorised the people for 20 years, forcing young boys at gunpoint to shoot their own parents and then turning them into child soldiers, brutally raping little girls and taking them into the bush as soldiers' brides, over 90 % of the population in northern Uganda were considered traumatised at the end of the terror.

Now, at the inauguration ceremony, which we were honoured to experience together with 10,000 people, Godfrey Loum puts his finger into the wound in his programmatic keynote speech. He says: "We come with a message of hope to the people of God in the region. Our destiny is not defined by the experiences of hopelessness we went through during the war but by the promises of God that are `yes' and `Amen' in Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour. We have a message of life in all its fullness which is the reason that Jesus Christ came into the world. ... Friends, Jesus is the healer who deals with problems at the root, a redeemer who can break every chain and a saviour who can set the captives free." It all sounds like gospel and reminds me of Martin Luther King's starting point: "*We shall overcome ...*"

And it is in this spirit that Bishop Godfrey then outlines the mission of his church, and from the outset, he also has possible allies in mind: "We will partner with other likeminded organisations to restore hope in our people and transform their lives." It is astonishing that in the sense of this holistic mission, after trauma healing, he first thinks of the inmates of prisons, and from there moves on to the ministry of the church to children and young people, focuses on families and places an emphasis on "gender-based violence".

It becomes really explosive when the new bishop – and highest state representatives from government, parliament, judiciary and military are present – addresses the relations to politics: He sharply criticises the violent suppression of the opposition during the recent presidential elections: "The culture of violence around election periods are becoming the norm rather than the exception. We believe that every Ugandan has the right and freedom to express themselves and associate with whomever they choose ..." He announced that his Anglican Church will join forces with other Christian and religious organisations to ensure free, independent and fair elections. "In the values of the kingdom of God and in the distinct call of the people of God to live out their personal faith in public and not in private, we have a unique gift to offer those with heavy responsibilities." These gifts, which the bishop offers, *in the values of the kingdom of God*, to government and opposition alike, are "our loving motivation, our biblical principles, and the political imperative of the Gospel".

I am amazed how clearly this Ugandan church leader also has international challenges in mind: "We live in a global village", he says, reminding us that 1.4 billion people currently live in poverty – with 1 % of the world's population owning 50 % of the world's resources. Contrast this with his statement: "We believe all people are created equally in the image of God." His conclusion: "We will pray and work for a just, peaceful, and prosperous world order" – the kingdom of God as motivation and perspective of church work for a just and peaceful development for the benefit of all people. The mission of our partners in Africa, from the healing of personal traumas to socio-political responsibility to work for a new world order – can *our* understanding of mission fall short of this?

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Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and 'all else' will be added to you. This is a priority setting that is really challenging. As a pastor and responsible leader of a church district, I know how easy it is to lose sight of this priority. What is not on the agenda? Cases of sexual abuse also in our church – gender-appropriate language – energy-efficient equipment of church buildings – building management in general up to the complete abandonment of real estate – development of a sustainable purchasing culture – safety at work around the clock – job planning, asset management, financial law, personnel law – above all the sword of Damocles of demographic change and permanently high church resignations and dwindling church acceptance and threateningly decreasing financial resources. Setting priorities? Urgently needed: **Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and 'all else' will be added to you.**

And indeed: It helps. Since 2016 on the board, now also as chairman of the Gossner Mission, I have experienced how the focus on the *kingdom of God*, how the work for a better world *in the sense of our God* opens up unimagined perspectives.

- *Decrease in financial resources?* No: Increase in donations, gratifying, sustainable, year after year!
- *Limitation of human resources?* No: Expansion of the network of volunteers – and the recruitment of highly competent people who are happy to commit themselves to One World in their retirement!
- *Reduction of our fields of work?* No: Expansion of our commitment, officially since 2016 a completely new field of work in Africa – Uganda with an intensively grown partnership with two dioceses!
- *Over ageing in the supporter scene?* No: Through the Weltwärts work, astonishing identification of young people with Gossner Mission – North-South volunteers as well as South-North volunteers – on the way to their own Gossner youth organisation!
- Finally: *Marginalisation of such a "small" mission organisation?* No: Through a unique profile, through a high level of efficiency and through the strong partnership with several regional churches, especially through the close and trusting cooperation with Berlin Mission Society, we are well positioned for the future.

Experience has taught me that fear is a bad advisor. This is not only true for anxious Kabakas in faraway countries, it is no different in nearby church offices. **Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and 'all other things' will fall to you** – that's how it is.

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Last but not least – it is, after all, Epiphany – a look at the outcome of the Christmas narratives. On January 6th, our attention is naturally first directed to the "holy three kings". They were not so much royal as wise: stargazers from the East, described by Matthew as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy, for here come the first emissaries from all over the world to pay homage to the Messiah of Israel. Gold, frankincense, myrrh – and then what? Not a word to anyone – well, a commandment of prudence not to tell Herod anything, but otherwise? Since they saw the star, they were delighted – that is already the only expression of their emotional state. They may be satisfied with themselves and the world, wise men that is, their calculations proved to be correct, a little luck, perhaps even God's guidance came along – they gave some of their riches into the offering, and so they turn back, at peace with themselves and the world. Rich, wise men: no mission left.

How different the shepherds in Luke's Gospel – representatives of a marginalised fringe group, they open their mouths already in the stable: when they saw the new born, **they spread the word that was spoken to them about this child**. Hard to believe, the shepherds from the fields of Bethlehem as the first missionaries – with an open end, typical mission: **And all those before whom it came were amazed at the speech that the shepherds had told them**. But this does not bring to silence these marginalised members of society – the Christmas narrative *ends in missionary fashion* when representatives of the precariat have their say: **The shepherds turned back, praised and glorified God for all they had heard and seen, as had been said to them**.

They had heard and seen that heaven is open to poor people.

They had heard and seen that a heavenly messenger proclaimed **great joy**, especially to the marginalised: **The Saviour is born to you today**.

They had heard and seen that the glory of God on high and peace on earth now belong together.

They had heard and seen – a child, a child in a feeding trough, whose heavenly characteristic was to be, of all things, these *nappies* ...

God himself: arrived at the precariat – the poor of this world cannot remain silent. Yes, yes, also out of recognisable self-interest, I can well understand that. *Rich wise men* may be content with the personal outcome of their life's journey. *Poor and marginalised men and women* have a mission: They spread the world-shaking humanity of this God with all its consequences.

Wise restraint or daring mission: Which side are we on?

The answer is obvious: With the shepherds of Bethlehem, it is our brothers and sisters in Uganda and Zambia, in India and Nepal and in so many other countries of this earth, who *take us into their mission* – from *their* mouths we hear the claim of Jesus Christ to us: **Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and 'all other things' will be added to you**.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ:

The kingdom of God *is* our mission. Amen.