

To the ends of the earth ...

(Chatham Islands 1st of January 2017 – Dawn Ceremony)

Dear friends,

the last days before our departure from Germany I spent reflecting this speech. I had no real idea of this place and the congregation listening to it. All I knew was the theme which had been given to me by Mark Whitfield. „To the ends of the earth“ - the last words of the bible-reading we just heard. Here Jesus is speaking to his disciples and encourages them to be witnesses „in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth“. I'm sure at that time none of them had an idea of the existence of New Zealand or even the Chatham Islands. A few chapters later in acts 13 we read the same words in a different and somehow bitter context. St. Paul, disappointed that his preaching was less successful in the Jewish community than he had hoped, is now focussing on other target groups. In verse 47 he says: „For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, »I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.«”

Being the chairman of Gossner Mission, today a foundation in the tradition of a mission society, I tried to put myself in the heads and hearts of these five young men who were inspired by these verses. They heard a call comparable perhaps to the one Abraham received when he was told (1. Mose 12,1) „Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.“ What could they know about this place where we have put our feet now? Probably nearly nothing. At their time there were no photos, no videos, no internet or other sources which we easily use. All they knew was that they would have to leave behind completely the life they had lived so far. Never again would they see their relatives, their friends, the familiar environment. A journey into the great unknown it was: to the ends of the Earth.

What motivated them? What gave them the strength to go this path, perhaps not completely fearless but filled with a spirit which was able to overcome all fears and objections? I guess they knew already from the life they had lived so far that they could rely on words like „you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you“. I'm sure these young men with a more working class background knew about hardships and difficulties and sorrows. They were no trained theologians or ordained ministers. They were craftsmen or teachers or peasants. They lived in a society which was – from our point of view – full of social problems and distortions. Father Johannes Gossner – as they called the founder of our Mission Society – faught against the social and the spiritual miseries of his time with the same intensity. Gossner was convinced that these Christians were able or perhaps even better prepared to do mission work amongst the poorest than people with a pure academic background. The other Mission Societies and the Churches looked critical at these activities. He was already 63 years old when he sent the first craftsmen-missionaries to Australia. Until his death more than 130 followed and worked successfully in many parts of the world. All of them more or less with the justified feeling that they were sent to the ends of the earth.

Today we remember the names of Franz Schirrmeister, David Müller, Oskar Beier, Heinrich Baucke and Johann Engst, who put their feet on these islands to share the life of the indigenoues people and to bring to them the Good News of God's saving love. If we look at their work and the results from the perspective of a Lutheran Church-representative they were not really successful. They learned the language of the Maori and the Moriori and they settled amongst them and tried to teach them but the ground for their seeds was hard to work with. The tragedy of the extermination of the Moriori by there Maori-successors was still a

bleeding wound and other difficulties did not allow any real success. Within a few years two of them had left this place or were buried at the end of the earth and only Heinrich Baucke with his wife and Johann Engst remained – three women Johannes Gossner had sent shortly after to help them in their loneliness. They lived on in faith, Baucke founded his family and they became precious members of the local society. But the dream they had dreamed of becoming „a light for the Gentiles“ did not really come true.

So was it a dream not worth to be remembered? Not at all – I will tell you a story about a few colleagues of them who were sent out almost at the same time.

Accidentally they stranded in Calcutta on their way to other places and met people who worked and suffered there and they followed them to their homes in the northern area of the state of Bihar which is now Jharkhand for those who want to look it up in the map. These people were the indigenous people of India, they are called Adivasi, dark skinned tribes who were the descendants of the people who lived there before the present Indogermans, today's Hindus moved in the country. They had survived in the uncomfortable parts of the land and to the Hindus they were and still are below the lowest cast.

These missionaries, colleagues in a way to the ones who came here lived and worked amongst these people and tried the same: to spread the gospel of the loving God.

After six years – the first had been buried, the first wives and the first children had been buried because of the difficult conditions of life – after six years they wrote a letter to father Gossner, telling him that nobody had been baptised so far, and their question was: Should we give up and come home?

Gossner replied and wrote: You do what you can do, the other is not in your hands. Go on with your work.

Shortly after the first Adivasi was baptised and this was the opening of a dam. Today the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church of India is one of the biggest protestant denominations. Since 1919 they are – the first – independent Church of the formerly so-called Third World. Not only surviving but even growing under the pressure of a more and more fundamentalist Hindu-Movement.

The dream of those young missionaries has come true, not in New Zealand at the Chathams but in India. And we as Gossner Mission have a strong relation to the GELC.

I'm ashamed in a way when I must say that we as Gossner Mission have not really honoured those in a way unsuccessful missionaries whom we sent to the ends of the earth. Probably because there was no lasting effect, no Lutheran Maori- or Moriori-Church was founded at the Chathams. We celebrated our 175th birthday four years ago as Gossner Mission and of course we mentioned the nameless number, but most of the time they are forgotten.

When I heard that you are celebrating their coming to this place I was touched and still find it remarkable that you honour those people and I felt it was my duty to come here and share these moments. Through them we honour the one who gave them the strength and the belief which enabled them to live their dreams and to come as witnesses, sent as a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

In my greeting for the booklet* I wrote what I want to repeat here: As Christians we stand in a way always on the shoulders of those who once as missionaries carried the Good News into the world. And as long as we are standing there we are standing on solid ground.

* *it was produced for the participants of the programme at the Chatham Islands*