

**A Sermon on the text Luke, 9, 10-17,  
for the Ecumenical Church Service  
on the 65th Anniversary  
of the Liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp  
Pfarrer Dr. Björn Mensing  
Kloster Karmel „Heilig Blut“ Dachau  
2ns May 2010.**

*And the apostles, when they were returned, told him all that they had done. And he took them, and went aside privately into a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida. And the people, when they knew it, followed him: and he received them, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God, and healed them that had need of healing. And when the day began to wear away, then came the twelve, and said unto him, Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns and country round about, and lodge, and get victuals: for we are here in a desert place. But he said unto them, Give ye them to eat. And they said, We have no more but five loaves and two fishes; except we should go and buy meat for all this people. For they were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, Make them sit down by fifties in a company. And they did so, and made them all sit down. Then he took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them, and brake, and gave to the disciples to set before the multitude. And they did eat, and were all filled: and there was taken up of fragments that remained to them twelve baskets.*

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In today's Gospel reading we heard about the feeding of five thousand people by Jesus. Jesus spoke the blessing over the five loaves of bread and the two fishes, provisions which his disciples had brought with them. Having told the disciples to make the people sit down in groups of about fifty, Jesus then divided up the food and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the groups of people. Luke reports that all ate and were satisfied. Seeing that Luke does not report how this was could have happened, we can explain the miraculous feeding of the five thousand in different ways. One possibility is that some people within the groups of fifty had also brought provisions with them. Following the example of generosity set by Jesus and the disciples, these people may also offered their provisions to be shared, not just by those who had brought food but also by those who had none.

Sixty-five years ago it was **Alan Wood Lukens** and other American soldiers who shared their provisions with the approximately thirty-five thousand prisoners freed from the Dachau concentration camp, thereby bringing immediate relief and healing to them after their years of starvation. The German journalist **Karl Adolf Gross**, who had been a prisoner in Dachau since 1940, described this in his diary, in an entry on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1945. "Our flesh-pot never before bubbled over as it did today. The good things placed almost too great a load on our digestions – what a change from bitter need to magical abundance! Instead of a quarter piece of bread, a great two pound tin of hearty preserved meat which two of us could hardly finish. Not a bad start, no indeed, not a bad start! What is the expression we use these days in a community of brethren? 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.' Now even our palates can bear witness to the sweet care shown to us by our heavenly Father."

However, even in the time of the regime of the National Socialists there were people in Dachau and elsewhere who shared their bread and their food with concentration camp prisoners, as the following examples show:

**Jean Bernard**, a priest from Luxemburg, was surprisingly given ten days leave from his imprisonment in Dachau in February 1942. In soutane and sandals he made his way to Luxemburg. He wrote as follows: "On Dachau station I learned that I had to wait a good hour for the next train to Munich. At the same time I felt an overpowering hunger. 'Go into the kitchen,' the manager of the station restaurant said to me, when I explained that I had no ration card. Soon after he followed me, and when he saw my shaven head he served me a huge helping of soup and potatoes – the regular meal of the day.... On the advice of the waitress I went into a bakery. She gave me ration cards for bread, with which I was able to obtain some pieces of cake." On his return to the camp Jean Bernard took a "mighty big ham sandwich" for his friend

**Batty Esch**, and a box of cigarillos as a sop for the SS man for the return of his civilian clothing. “Luckily I got back to my old place, with Batty Esch in Block 30, room 1. Batty immediately disappeared into the corner with the ham sandwich and did not come out until the last crumb had disappeared.”

**Hans Schwarz**, a communist from Vienna who was in the Dachau camp from 1938 to 1944, remembered the following: “There were brave people who at least bestowed kind looks on us on our way through the streets; there were children who handed bread to us, even if an SS man would trample the bread underfoot before our eyes; there were women who secretly and stealthily passed us cigarettes or a piece of bread, for us to take.... Because of these courageous people we were able to endure a lot. Because of these few we knew that our struggle for freedom was not in vain.”

Sixty-five years ago the Jewish prisoner **Zwi Katz**, from Lithuania, took part in the Death March from Kaufering to Dachau. As happened in Fürstfeldbruck, so also in Dachau, inhabitants of those places threw bread to the miserable figures passing through. Zwi Katz was sure that “... for one who was marching along with the last of his strength, the small reserve of strength which such a small piece of bread gave could decide his fate.”

Among the prisoners in the Dachau camp there were not a few who shared their food unselfishly with others. For example:

The Czech high school teacher **Karel Littloch**, who came to Dachau from Mauthausen in November 1942, reported that among his fellow prisoners in Block 10 and later in Block 20 there was never any trading with food. If some were absent from a meal, food would be kept for them by their fellow-prisoners. But if some of them had already received food in their work parties, as happened more and more from 1943 on, they would try to share the kept food fairly among their fellow-prisoners in the block. Littloch said: “It was wonderful, and done quite naturally.”

**Paul Wauer**, a Jehovah’s Witness who was brought from Breslau to the Dachau concentration camp, was a prisoner and a “trusty” in long-term confinement, in the notorious “bunker”. Because a “trusty’s” cell was not locked at night, he crept out secretly at night to bring water and bread to starving prisoners, and to bring them words of comfort from the Bible.

The Slovenian **Anton Jež** reported about the founding of a “parcel club” with some of his compatriots. Those who received parcels from relatives and friends at that time would share the contents of the parcels with all the members of the “parcel club”. If a particular group consisted of six men altogether, of whom only four regularly received parcels, nevertheless all would share equally in the food in the parcels. Jež called this an “emergency exit in the dreadful life situation in the concentration camp, and comradesly help for two who before the end of the war had long lost any hope of receiving a parcel.”

The German prisoner **Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz** received a parcel from home for the first time in the Dachau camp in November 1942. In his secretly kept diary he wrote: “I gave some of the cookies and pastry, with some orange marmalade on, to the comrades whom I knew rather better. Each of them could also eat a fig. ...all were so happy for once to have a different taste in the mouth, especially something sweet.... The palate had to learn anew that there was more than just tasteless cabbage, **turnips** and bread. - Although certainly, we are glad to receive bread. It keeps us on our feet.” At the end of December another parcel arrived for him: “How well it was all packed, and how it made me smile – with all the love in it. If only I could have unpacked it carefully by myself, but at my table alone twelve people are sitting, and in the room there are ninety. And all these eyes are looking – and so many of them never receive a parcel. At first I gave some comrades some small things to taste, but then I felt ashamed and began to slice up those lovely, lovely cakes. All that remained for me were the crumbs. And so it went with nearly everything. I gave the cartographer half the bread and the tin of spread – I was glad to do it, because then for once he had enough to eat.”

The German priest **Hermann Scheipers** told of a brother companion who gave him his whole bread ration: “One evening my fellow-prisoner, the youth chaplain of the Diocese of Dresden-Meißen, **Bernhard Wensch**, came secretly in the dark to the barbed wire fence around the infirmary block, where the condemned people were gathered, and brought me the most precious thing he could give – his ration of bread for the day. It was about four slices of bread. Someone who in his life weeks or months must live practically just from the so-called “water soup” knows what that meant. I should not have taken the bread at that time. But I had no idea how badly things were going with my brother companion. He was suffering from dreadful diarrhoea and gave me his bread, the only thing which he could eat in his condition: he literally gave me himself. Only a few days later, weakened by hunger, he died. It was on

15<sup>th</sup> August 1942, the feast of Mary's Assumption into Heaven. I can never forget this act of pure love. It stands for me in direct relationship with what Christ did for us in his self-offering on the evening before his death."

*Prisoners shared the bread among themselves. They carried out the command of Jesus in the Gospel reading of the feeding of the five thousand: "Give them something to eat." So today we meet not only those who were terrorised by the men of the SS and who were freed by American soldiers sixty-five years ago, but who lived out and show us the meaning of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand: how in need out of nothing one can give life. They show me how in spite of my own need I can see the need of another who needs me, and give him from what I have. The lived example of the prisoners of Dachau speaks more loudly and clearer than many fine words.*

*In memory of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Sharing of the Bread by the prisoners of Dachau, we break the blessed bread among ourselves in this divine service. In the early Christian communities the Breaking of the Bread was a necessary part of assembling together. Just as Jesus had done according to the Jewish custom of his time, one of the community would speak the prayer of blessing over the bread, break it and give it around to the others. For the meal those who were well off would bring rich food with them, with which the sisters and brothers who were poor and hungry could be satisfied. In his *Acts of Apostles* (Acts 2, 46), Luke describes the life of the early Christians in Jerusalem: "Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God."*

As the community grew, it became as time went by ever more difficult to combine the assembling together with a communal meal, according to the intention of Jesus. It came down to a separation of the Eucharist as the "Last Supper" and the community meal. In the liturgy of the Orthodox Christian Churches this community meal, called *Artoklasia* in Greek, takes place until today. Among Catholics and Protestants the celebration of the community meal is being re-discovered and is designated *Agape*, the love-meal.

The Breaking of the Bread strengthens us in human fellowship, *promotes the community-building and reconciliation, and gives us new strength to act responsibly.* May God let us experience this when later, in our divine service, we bless the Bread, break it, and share it with one another.

Amen.

(Pfr. Dr. Björn Mensing / engl. Prof. Dr. Dave Dargie)



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