

Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag 2001
Opening worship June 13, 2001, 18.00 Uhr
Ökumenisches Zentrum Christuskirche, Beethovenplatz, Frankfurt/Main
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You have set my feet in a broad place. (Psalm 31,8)

Dear friends,

“You have set my feet in a broad place”, that sounds good!

“You have set my feet in a broad place”, that sounds like a sigh of relief, like deep breathing, like the start for a happy dance in dewy grass! “You have set my feet in broad place.”

But we should not be mistaken when we guess in which situation these words are spoken in Psalm 31. They are obviously not spoken by a person who just was able to buy a plot of land with not a few acres at a reasonable price overlooking the lake and a view of the mountains on the other side.

On the contrary who speaks about the broad place which has God given to him or her is somebody who was in a very tight situation and who is partly still in it.

We hear the voices of such people in the words of the Psalm: “Be gracious to me, o Lord, for I am distress; my eye wastes away from grief” (V.9). “My life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away” (V. 10).

And when these people look back to what they have overcome through Gods help they say: “You have taken heed of my adversities and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place.”

It is not difficult to imagine in which narrow situation these people were. There may be one who has been cornered - nice English word: to be cornered! On the one side the wall and on the other, too, and in front of him those who shout: “You are responsible! I will sue you! I have already filed the complaint! Pay your debts! I will crutch the last penny out of you! It’s your fault! Why have you done this! You should have known better! ...” It is very, very narrow in this corner being confronted with all the accusations against one’s life.

There may be others who are cramped with their whole family into a small room. 6 people within a few square meters. “There is not more space available for you”, they are told, “this is enough for you. Why did you not stay where you have come from? We don’t need people like you in our country. We need only useful people here. You are allowed only to move within the city-boundary”.

How do these people long to have a broad place to move freely, to stretch their legs and to unfold the wings of their souls!

It is a deep longing within people for more space for living and an even deeper anxiety to loose the place where they live. That is not without great dangers. When I looked in my German-English dictionary after the English word for the German notion “Lebensraum” which means “space for living” I found just the word “Lebensraum”. It seems to be one of those nice words like “Waldsterben” or “Angst” which are borrowed from the German language to indicate something which seems to be foreign to the Anglo-Saxon soul. When I saw this I was deeply ashamed. Because I realized when this German word “Lebensraum” was coined. It was the time after the first World-war when the German people thought they would have not enough space in their own country for all of them. And out of this anxiety it became an obsession and out of the obsession became the disastrous aggression against all our neighbors which caused untold suffering and harm to so many people. And this fear, deep in

our hearts, is still not healed. We hear again and again people saying: There are already too many in the boat! We have not space enough for all!

How does God provide a broad place for people who are in distress and anxiety, who are crushed by their enemies and cramped by difficult circumstances, without taking it away from other people? What kind of space is this which is not measured in square meters or acres and is not sold by real estate agents?

The Psalmist says: "You are my rock and my fortress ... you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, o Lord, faithful God!" (V. 3.5). "I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have taken heed of my adversities, and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place."

It is a great wonder: Among so many enemies and adversities, there is one who is not against me. God is for me, God, who speaks and acts in favor of me. Therefore the Psalmist is able to say: "I trust in you, o Lord; I say, 'your are may God.' My times are in your hand!" You are my God! - not only mine of course, - but surely the one who is for me. This gift of confidence and trust, that is the broad place on which God has set my feet. It is his love which broadens my narrow life and which breaks through all the constraints which threaten to suffocate my life.

When I am cornered by people around me who try to deny me the means and the right to live - I know: God is for me.

When I am cornered by the dark voices inside myself who try to convince me: Your life is of no worth - I know: God is for me.

When people tell me: There is no space left for you in this world! I know: God is for me. He will set my feet in a broad place.

Or to use the words of the Apostle Paul: "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, no height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39)

God's love, that is a broad place which gives us open space and save shelter, liberty and security. What in human terms seems to contradict: to take refuge and to seek freedom that coincides in God's love and faithfulness: a broad place and a save haven.

To realize this may change much in our lives. To know, God is for us, will help us to realize that our enemies are not as dangerous as we thought. We no longer have to fear that others will be able to deprive us of our space for living. It will be easier to share ground with them - with the asylum seekers and with those who have a green card, with the Aussiedler from Russia and with our neighbor next door behind his wire netting fence. We will realize that there is space for all, if only we do not use too much ground as a battlefield against one another. Based on and founded in his love we will experience in many ways: "You have set my feet in a broad place."