

## Meditation for Oswald Bayer's 80th Birthday Celebration

—Athina Lexutt—

"It's as beautiful here as it is in Brittany!" That, dear Oswald, is your standard when it comes to scenic beauty. But not only that. Many years ago, as a young man, you made a long bicycle tour through this special region. You discovered light in its most intoxicating form, which made all the colors come to life. And since then you have spent many holidays there. Brittany is for you proof that God really did create all things well—so much so that it must surely be part of the Garden of Eden!

I'm sure that your memories of Brittany and everything you experienced there were always a comfort to you at those times in life when you were definitely not in the Garden of Eden, when the conditions of paradise were far away and were replaced by worry, sadness, fear, and the craziness of everyday life, a craziness that even the world knows is most unparadisaal.

We have just been in Brittany for three weeks—and even if I don't like saying it: you are right. Brittany is literally magic, a place without parallel, and just being there transports you from exhaustion back to creation, from the world back to paradise, from gardening at home back to a part of the Garden of Eden. "It is as beautiful here as it is in Brittany!" This is your standard for all life that exists beyond academe, your yardstick for a little bit of this-worldly comfort.

In fact, we all have our standards. It might be a holiday resort against which all the others have to be measured. Grandma's potato fritters recipe will forever define how all potato fritters should taste. A composer might be so influential that no one else can match their work. An author, a poet might write so wonderfully that reading something else is hardly worthwhile. The memory of a deceased person can be so transfigured that nobody else could ever be like him or her. We all have them in our pockets and in our heads: the standard for anything or anyone, and even if we primly and solemnly aver that you can never and should never make comparisons—because in many cases circumstances have changed and any chance of an accurate comparison would be impossible and, besides that, it is grossly unfair—even though we know all that, we still do it, and most of the time, the new thing or new person fares worse against our gold standard. Otherwise, it would not be a standard. And this standard is always a comfort to us: If potato fritters do not taste right, then we know from grandma how they should taste and how they once did taste when she made them. If a holiday destination is like Brittany—wow! But if not, we still have Brittany in our hearts. And just the memory of that is a little bit of this-worldly comfort.

But what is our comfort when it is no longer just a matter of a holiday or a cake, a poem or a composition? What is our comfort in life and in death? What is our standard when it comes to more than a time of short earthly happiness? What is our measure of eternal happiness?

The text from the Herrnhuter book of watchwords (Losungen) for September 30, 2019, your 80th birthday, dear Oswald, gives a clear and unequivocal answer. It says in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction." That sounds so easy. So obvious. All of us who are sitting here—and most of us somehow or other are involved with theology, either professionally, or because the Christian faith is very important to us for a variety of reasons—would probably have answered the question of comfort in a similar way: God, the merciful Father, who is the epitome of mercy, is our consolation, our comfort. What else? But as is always the case with things that come naturally to our lips, we do not question them. We do not ask why God is our comfort. For us, it has always been like that, it is good and right, and it will always be that way. But why? How can we explain this outside the hallowed walls of this impressive,

but still relatively small cosmos of the “Protestant Theological Seminary” (Evangelisches Stift) here in Tübingen?

How can we convey this to a world that may not be able to do much at all, if anything, with this God or even with any god, for that matter? How do we approach those people who trip up and stumble over such words as “goodness” and “mercy” and despair of the “dear” God because a very important person in their lives has died, or because they themselves suffer from a life-threatening disease or because they have lost their jobs, or because a wedge has come between them and a dear friend, or because they can’t believe there can even be a God in such a godless world with so much pain and suffering?

And how can we even hear and see our merciful God amid so much suffering, when we ourselves are under spiritual attack (*Anfechtung*) and this God of ours seems as distant as anything and is anything but a comfort? It seems so self-evident to us that our comfort is to be found in this merciful God—so self-evident that we have forgotten that to those outside the circle of faith it is anything but self-evident.

The watchword text also, I think, has an answer for all this. No cheap answer. Not an answer that could be said to be just as self-evident. Nor is it an answer that is immediately obvious to anyone and certainly not a sure-fire remedy or panacea that just has to be pulled out of the pocket. It is not an answer that comes easily to us. But one that costs dearly. One that has to be wrestled with again and again. This answer presupposes that we are ready to oppose the wisdom of the world with the foolishness of the cross, and to expose ourselves to what is an offence, a skandalon, to all skepticism. It presupposes that we are ready to expose ourselves to the contempt of the world around us and our own inner world.

The answer is Jesus Christ. God, this vague, banal concept, the altogether nebulous notion of mercy and the intangible word of consolation—all this becomes concrete and can be grasped with the senses because God comes to us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God is at our side, in the midst of our life, in the midst of our world.

But it is not so easy with this Jesus Christ. Because he’s not just the charismatic itinerant preacher, the moral role model, our brother. More than once our world of reason has been shattered. More than once we have been pushed into an almost insoluble tension. More than once our thinking and willing have been turned upside down. That God meets us as one in three; that Jesus Christ is true God and true man at the same time; that he died on the cross, and that his death means our redemption; that he is our Lord—all this does not match our beautifully ordered concept of mathematical predictability, it does not fit the neat distinctions we make between performance, reward and punishment, and emancipation and freedom. And it is not surprising that a theology, which for good reason understands itself as a science and therefore must satisfy scientific requirements, has somehow always had a tough time in the world of science.

Despite all this, we put our trust in Christ, in what he has said and done for us and find in him the source of all our comfort. But this may be even more difficult, because it means getting involved with him, orienting yourself to him, and making yourself dependent on him in a way that is not verifiable in this life. And just because we put our trust in him, does not mean that we can lull ourselves into a false sense of security, thinking that nothing will touch us. For we are not immune

to spiritual attack (*Anfechtung*) and doubt; we do not feel liberated, even redeemed; we often lack comfort—and we still suffer, and there is still evil. The answer of the watchword (*Losung*) demands much from us. No: it demands everything from us. It demands that we apply a completely different

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standard to our ideas of peace, certainty, freedom, and comfort. It demands that we do not stay with ourselves and our own opinions but expose ourselves to the truth of Jesus Christ. It means that we must meet Christ under the cross and entrust him with everything that we are and have.

We will not be able to prove or provide any evidence that “it is worth it.” But we can experience what it is like to listen to this demand and to put our trust in Christ. Luther says that “experience alone makes a theologian.” You, Oswald, have pointed out that this does not mean just any experience, but—in the context of Luther’s further statements on the question of what makes a theologian, the answer is very clear—the experience of the Word. To hear the Word of Scripture, to eat and drink Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament and to live in the strength of that food—that is the experience that makes us all theologians.

That is the experience of our merciful God, who runs after us again and again, against all human reason; who has reconciled us to himself in the midst of our sinfulness, against all human sense of justice; who has turned to us in his Son once and for all against all our expectations; who gave us life through his death on the cross, though we did not deserve it; who, when we feel abandoned, is close to us and carries us through everything; who drives us, despite all our lethargy and proneness to ask what’s in it for me, to love and serve our neighbor; who does not make us proud of our supposed strength, but urges us to have regard for the weak, as Paul says in Romans 14; who wants us to accept each other because he has accepted us; who meets us with grace where we would have deserved and expected only anger; who comforts us because he is the God of comfort.

Your confirmation text, dear Oswald, speaks of this. In 2 Thessalonians 3:3 we read: “The Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.” We can rely on the Word of God. Contrary to all the world’s lies, God is the one who stands by his Word and we can therefore take him at his Word. We can come before him and hold it up to him and say, this is your Word. The Psalmists already knew this, and we too should call it to mind again and again. That God spoke his Word in creation, that he made this Word flesh in Jesus Christ, that he encounters our senses in the embodied Word of the Sacrament, that he accompanies us in the work of the Holy Spirit, and that he calls us to become doers of his Word—that is the standard for the comfort that we live by and which we can and must pass on to others.

“It is as beautiful here as it is in Brittany!” That is your standard, Oswald, for a successful holiday and maybe for a little more. And so we all have our standards by which everything has to be measured, our standard for earthly happiness or at least earthly satisfaction—and I would definitely include potato fritters that taste like grandma’s in the “happiness” category. But the standard for eternal bliss, for our comfort in life and in death—that we cannot set ourselves, but it is set for us by God, who wants nothing else but that we enjoy life in its fullness. This is the God who meets us only in Jesus Christ. He makes us his beloved creatures and we remain that, because he is faithful, his Word is true, and his yes to us is stronger than any no of ours. He gives us the moment and lets us make it our own so that we can live from it amid all the agonizing struggles, the attacks, and the trials of life.

Therefore, as Andreas Gryphius puts it—the poet whose words about the moment (“...the moment is mine...”) were printed on the birthday invitation—we should heed this moment. It brings together the past of God’s creation and the future of God’s kingdom. That is why we can find our comfort in this moment. For understood that way, this moment is fixed amid all that is transient in life, it is true amid all the lies. This moment, God’s moment, is free amid our captivity, it is life in the midst of our death. This moment brings God’s blessing to the ordinary and mundane, it brings the eternal into our everyday life. Indeed, this moment is Jesus Christ come into our present. This

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moment is God’s moment, God’s time, it is the measure of everything in space and time, it is the time of comfort, the time of mercy, the time of blessing. Amen