Thanks, and rest, when it is hard

Last Sunday of the church year

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Matthew 11:25-30 (ESV)

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Grace be with you and peace from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is the last Sunday of the church year, and Jesus still has a word for us. The last Sunday of the church year marks the end of the church year and thus the beginning of the season of Advent. A time when we remember that Jesus came to earth, that Jesus became man, but also that Jesus will come again with power and glory.

At that time Jesus declared.

At that time Jesus prays this prayer to God the Father. Matthew tells us that just before this prayer Jesus has gone around preaching the gospel to all. Jesus has performed miracles and great signs. To the surprise of many, the disciples believed in him, but most people indeed whole towns did not come to faith in Jesus! I can think the same way today: If only we could see a miracle here in Denmark, then people would believe. But even today people turn their backs on the gospel and on Jesus. Jesus must be said to be a poor missionary, for no new followers have come; the opposite has almost happened: more and more begin to hate Jesus.

In the same way we can also become discouraged when we think about people turning away from Jesus, and we can get the idea that we are poor missionaries when we proclaim his word. Also when we hear about Christians who are persecuted and killed, we can become sad over adversity. But Jesus helps us. For it is at this time that Jesus prays this prayer.

"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

"I thank you!" Jesus praises the Father; Jesus confesses the Father. And he does it so that we can hear. Notice this: Prayer is not necessarily silent. Here Jesus prays out loud. Jesus allows us to hear what it is he is praying to his Father about. Surprisingly, Jesus does not come downcast to his Father, even though he could. He has preached, but they have not received him. He has testified about himself, but they have not found it relevant. He has come to save, but they would not.

Jesus praises the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth. The Lord is the one who rules and reigns both in heaven and on earth. We too are allowed to take comfort in that today. We do it when we sing as the closing hymn:

Commit whatever grieves thee
into the faithful hands
of him who never leaves thee,
who heaven and earth commands.
Who points the clouds their courses,
whom winds and waves obey,
he will direct thy footsteps
and find for thee a way.

Jesus confesses and is also thankful, *"that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children."* How paradoxical it is that God has hidden this. We are talking about the gospel, about the forgiveness of sins, about the salvation that can be received through and in Jesus. This is hidden. This is not obvious. You cannot read it in an oak tree or find it in the stars. There are religious experts, professors who know the entire Old Testament, rabbis who have done nothing but read the Old Testament. But they cannot see Jesus for who he is: as the king, as the Messiah, the Christ. No, the wise and understanding in the eyes of this world will probably not come to this church. We do indeed have people with fine titles, such as Ph.D., lawyer, master craftsman, consultant, and doctor, and we could go on, even with fine theological titles,

but wise and understanding in the world's eyes that we are not. For we are little children, or perhaps better translated: we are infants, says Jesus.

"Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

For this is well-pleasing in God's sight. God desires that all should come to him. But not that one should come to him in one's own strength, not in one's own desire or one's own studies. Yes, for we are not wise or understanding, but little children and Jesus continues!

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Jesus has been given all things by his Father. That means it is him we must relate to. Jesus has been given the authority to judge the whole world, but also to save this whole world. We do not know God. We cannot experience God as he is. But here we have just heard the mystery of the Trinity revealed, namely that no one knows the Son as he is except the Father, and no one knows the Father as he is except the Son. And notice this: *"and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."* So there is talk of revelation, of something that was hidden being made known. This relationship between the Father and the Son we are allowed to take part in. Not as the wise and understanding, but as little children!

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

This is a wonderful promise that Jesus gives. *"Come to me,"* says Jesus. This invitation is directed to all. Jesus does not say: *"Come only to me, you who labor and are heavy laden."* But Jesus says: *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden."* All, not the few, not the special ones, but all, says Jesus. *And I will give you rest.*

All of you! It applies to you who cannot let go of the harsh word you spoke. You who feel that things are not as they ought to be. You whose body will not do what you want. You who toss and turn at night because you cannot find rest. You who cannot bear that those closest to you do not believe in Jesus. You who long for a spouse and cannot find her or him. You who rush around trying to make everything work, but it looks so difficult.

To you Jesus says: COME TO ME! It sounds wonderful! Yes, coming to Jesus is not abstract or vague, but entirely concrete. The evangelist and disciple Matthew knew what it meant to come to Jesus. He sat in his tax booth, and one day Jesus came by and said, *"Follow me!"* and he did. But we also know what happened at the very end: Jesus ascended into heaven, and we also confess in the creed that Jesus sits at the right hand of God the Father. So how do I come to Jesus? I who am not wise and understanding, but a little child? What about now? How can we come to him?

Jesus answers in Matthew 18:20: *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."* You come to Jesus when you come to church. It gives rest to be together with other Christians. We can comfort and encourage one another. Jesus is with us.

You come to Jesus when you hear the sermon, for Jesus himself says in Luke 10:16: *"The one who hears you hears me."* It gives rest when you hear a sermon in which you hear what Jesus has done for you. For you hear Jesus speaking to you.

You come to Jesus when you are baptized. And when you are baptized, you are reminded of who you are in him. That gives us rest.

You come to Jesus when you receive the forgiveness of your sins here at the altar with the laying on of hands. Here you experience the rest that only Jesus can give.

You come to Jesus when he offers you himself in the Lord's Supper, his own body and blood, given for you. We rest in the words that are spoken to us: *"Peace be with you!"*

You come to Jesus when you pray to God, with thanksgiving, but also with sorrow. For God sees in secret and is in the secret place. He is your Father who hears your prayer. That gives peace and rest for the soul.

Yes, coming to Jesus is not abstract or vague, but entirely concrete. It is not banal and boring. Jesus truly desires to give us rest a rest that the world cannot give us, a peace we cannot give ourselves. Therefore, he keeps on saying: *Come to me*. He really means it!

Amen.

Let us bless one another with the apostle: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.