

- Oh God, the fountain of all good, we bring to thee our gifts according as thou has prospered us, enable us with our earthly things to give thee the love of our hearts and the service of our lives, through Jesus Christ thou God, amen.

- The text is speaking from first Corinthian 16, 13 to 14. Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. That all, that you do be done in love. Out of this well known passage, I choose two words on which I want you to center your attention in this hour. The words, be strong. How can I obtain strength? This is a question asked in all ages of mens life and in all periods of human history. It is a question asked with passion and despair in our time and asked most impatiently by those, who are no more children and not yet adults. In our text, Paul uses several times the imperative. Be strong, he asks the questions. We easily slip over it, but the short arrest of attention as fully, perhaps even more, than the other words of our text. For the demanding word "be" contains in its two letters, the whole riddle of the relation of men to God. Paul asks of the Christians of Corinth, not something, which is strange to them. He asks them to be what they are, Christians. All the imperatives he uses are descriptions of something, that is before they become demands for something that ought to be. Be what you are, that is the only thing one can ask of any being. One cannot ask of a being to be something, it is not according to its true nature. But this can and must one ask. One has a feeling as if life in all its forms, desires to be asked, to receive demands, but no life can receive demands for something, which it is not. It wants to be asked to become what it is and nothing else. This seems surprising, but the little part shows us, that it is true. Nobody questions, that one cannot ask fruits from ferns or grain from weed. Or water from a dry fountain or love from a cold heart. Or courage from a cowardly mind or strength from a weak life. If we ask such things from beings, who don't have them, we are foolish. And either they will laugh at us or they will move against us as unfair and hostile. We can ask of anything or anyone only to bring forth what he has, to become what he can become. Out of what is given to us we can act, receiving in all life precedes acting. Be strong, says Paul, he says it to those, who have received strength, as he himself has received strength in his weakness and the power of a new reality grasps him on his road to Damascus. Now some of us will ask, what about us? Who feel, that we have nothing received. That we do not have faith, courage and strength and love. We are wanting in all this, so is he commanding be of Paul not set to us? Or if somebody says it to us, must we not remain unconcerned or become hostile to him who says it? We are not strong, so nobody can ask us to be strong. Shall we remain weak? Shall we fall into resignation and become cynical about such demands and say, they may be for others, they are not for us. I hear many people, more than we believe, saying that. I hear whole classes of young people speak like that. I hear many individuals in the older generations repeat it. And I don't find any consolation in the Bible. There's a parable of the different soils, on which the seed of the divine message falls and on which only one soil brings fruit. There's the word of the many, who are called and the few who are elected. There's a terrifyingly realistic statement of Jesus, that those, to whom much is given will receive more and that from those to whom little is given, even this will be taken away. There's a contrast between those, who are born out of light and have become its children and those who are born out of darkness and have become its children. There's the parable of man as clay, which cannot revolt against God's potter, whatever the potter does to the clay. We would like to revolt, when we hear this. Many Christians revolt and have revolted, I have heard many of

them, whenever they read or heard these words. They close their ears against such hard words, because they cannot stand them. We would like to revolt, when we hear this also, but if we look around us and to the life of men, we are false to say, they are true the Bible at least sees reality as it is, even if the preaching of the Bible does not. We would like to say in good democratic phrasing, everyone gets a chance by God to reach fulfillment, but not everybody uses it. Some do, some don't. Both have their ultimate destiny in their own hands. We would like, that it were so, but we cannot escape the truth, that it is not so, the chances are not even. There's only a limited number of human beings to whom one can say, be strong, because they have received strength and the others, to whom many of us may belong, the only thing, the only honest thing I could say to them is accept, that you are weak. Don't pretend, that you are strong and if you dare to be what you are, this will be your strength, the only one you can have now. Accept, that you are weak, that is what we should say to those, who are weak. Accept, that you are a coward, that is what we should say to those, who are coward. Accept, that you are uncertain about your faith, that's what we should say to those, who are not firm in it. And to those, who don't learn, we should say accept it, that you are not able to learn. This sounds strange, but everyone who knows the human soul, above all, who knows his own soul, will understand what is meant. He will understand that for the weak ones, the first thing is to acknowledge and to accept their weakness. He who does this will cease to deceive himself by saying, I have at least something of what the apostle demands, he can demand it from me or partly at least I have it. There are perhaps people, who could rightly speak this to themselves, but just they would not do it. That there are others, for whom it is self deception, if they judge themselves in this way and to them we must say, accept, that you are weak for you are weak. Be honest towards yourselves. Let me say a word to those, who are responsible for others, as parents, teachers, ministers, counselors, friends. Don't say the demanding "be" to anybody without fear and great hesitation, if you use it, even if you use it towards yourselves, you touch at the mystery of a person's destiny in the perspective of the eternal. You touch at the mystery of your own eternal destiny. And all that's here, what Paul says to those, whom he considers to be strong. And whom therefore he can asked to be strong. The first thing he says is, that they shall we watchful. He knows, there is a non Christian in every Christian, there is a weak one in every strong one, there's cowardice in every courage. And unbelief in every faith and much hidden hostility in every love. Watchfulness means, that the Christian never can rest on his being a Christian. That a strong one never can rely on his strength. He must rely on something else. Paul calls it faith, he asks the Corinthians to stand on a firm ground. On a ground, which cannot be shaken, when all other foundations have shaken. The ultimate, the divine ground. To stand on this ground means to stand in the faith. Paul of course thinks of the faith in the form in which he has brought it to the Corinthians, but in this faith, the faith itself is present. Namely the standing on the ultimate ground, below any shaking and changing ground, to break the way to this ultimate ground is a meaning of the Christ. Stand firm in your faith means, don't give up that faith, which alone can make you ultimately strong by giving you the ultimate ground on which to stand. And everybody needs a ground to stand on. Standing firm in one's faith does not mean to adhere to a set of beliefs, it does not request us to suppress doubts about Christian or other doctrines. But it points to something, which lies beyond doubt, in that depths, in which men's being and all beings are rooted. To be aware of this ultimate ground, whatever its name is, to live in it and out of it is ultimate strength. Be strong and stand in faith is one and the same demand. But now remembering what we first said about the limits of every imperative, some may reply, we do not stand in any faith, doubt or unbelief is our destiny, but not faith. We know, they continue, that you are right. That there is no strength, where there is no faith, but we have no faith. And if there's some strength in us, it is, if

we can call it so, the strength of honesty. The unwillingness to subject ourselves to a faith, which is not ours. Be it for conventional reasons, be it for obedience to our parents, be it because of our own longing for strength, be it under the impression of emotion arousing evangelists as so many of our contemporaries. Our strength, they say, is to resist all this. And to reject strength coming out of the sacrifice of our intellectual integrity. Some of the best in our time would speak like this, to them I answer, your honesty proves your faith and therefore your honesty is your strength. You may not believe in anything, which can be stated in doctrines, but you stand on the ultimate ground, you stand firm in your faith as long as you stand in honesty and take your doubt and your unbelief seriously without restriction. Become aware of the faith, which you have and perhaps you will find even words for it, perhaps not. Perhaps you will find even Christian words for it, perhaps not. But with or without words, be strong, for you are strong. You are strong in the seriousness of your honesty. There's another enemy of strength, even more powerful, than the lack of faith. It is a disunity within ourselves. And the lack of courage coming out of it. The weakness which prevents us to say yes to ourselves. For the affirmation of one's self demands the greatest courage. He, who is united with himself is invincibly strong, but who is? We all are dominated by forces, which conquer parts of our being. And split our personality. We lack the strength, which is given with the united centered personality, we are disrupted by compulsions, formerly called demonic powers. And who could tell this split personality, be strong. To which side of the personality can such a command be addressed, but something else can happen to such a personality and perhaps it has happened to some of us, healing power maybe coming through men, but ultimately coming from the ground on which we stand can enter the personality and can unite it with itself so that an act of courage can become possible. I speak of the courage which takes upon itself the anxiety of our split personality. This courage is the inner most center of faith, it dares to affirm ourselves in spite of the deep anxiety about ourselves. Out of this courage to say in spite of, strength emerges, that strength, which overcomes the power splitting our soul and our world. Be courageous, say yes, yes to yourself, yes to your world in spite of the anxiety of the no, which is always working within you. And now Paul adds something to what he asks of the strong personality, something, which seems to be almost the opposite of it, he says, let all that you do be done in love. The strength of the personality, who Paul has in mind, is based on something beyond courage and faith. It is not the strength of a hero, it is the strength of him who surrenders the praise, which he would have received as a hero, as a strong personality to the humility of love. We all know strong personalities, perhaps in our family, in our friendship, in public life, whom we admire. But of whom we feel, that something is wanting. One can be strong by subjecting one's self to a strong discipline and by suppressing much in one's self and becoming powerful in relation to others. It is often this type of men, which is called a strong personality, certainly strength without the ability to direct one's self is impossible. But those, who have this ability and are admired as strong personalities, should ask themselves whether something is wanting. They should ask themselves whether their strength is not without love. Perhaps in order to confirm themselves, to say yes to themselves, they force upon others the same restrictions of life they have imposed on themselves. And their domineering strength creates opposition or submissiveness and in any case, weakness in others. There's a profound ambiguity about the strong Christian personality. Christianity could not live, society could not go on without them.