

Isn't even in ourselves the hidden prejudice that praying is only a means of refraining from action? Moses' prayer was a healing and rescuing action. May his example encourage us to become active... lastly, that God's will may be done, that powers of healing and blessing, that freedom and courage, God's presence might become real experience among us and around us, growing and deepening. Amen.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep and preserve our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## Sermon on Exodus, ch. 32, 7 – 14 Hanover International Worship, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Dear sisters and brothers,

Prayer is this Sunday's topic in the liturgical calendar of the evangelical churches in Germany. This moving dialogue between God and his chosen servant Moses is the O.T. lesson for today. So I decided to introduce to you a Moses who behaves quite different as he did in front the burning bush from which a voice emerged the hesitating and fearful Moses was unable to resist – a voice which announced a program of rescue for the oppressed and crying Hebrews in Egypt.

Now, roles seem to have been exchanged: there is a Moses, firm, strong, confident, decided to rescue his people from or against a God, angry and decided to wipe out a disobedient people which he no longer regards as his chosen people. Your people, whom you led out of Egypt... There is much more shattered than just a wineglass.

Prayer – sometimes it is arguing with God. Revolting against God, evoking God against God.

But stop. Not too fast. Who is God, what is prayer?

There are short and fervent prayers – undirected, uttered in shock or fear – you might say, just to whom it may concern. A cry of horror, a cry for help, for strength. Such prayers do not require experiences with God. Of course, experiences with someone deeply concerned may follow!

Usually prayer – private or in public – arises out of an existing relation to God. It requires experiences. How can I pray? What am I allowed to say? Which words, conveniences may I use? Answers will depend on our different views of God, the variety of our experiences with him.

What did Moses know, which was his experience? He knew: God is a fire that does not destroy. I have come here to rescue, the voice out of the bush had said. And when Moses had answered: Who am I?? I'm nobody!! the voice had firmly proclaimed: I am with you. It had lifted him, although it had left no way out, no chance to flee. It had called him to be an instrument of the strong, rescuing will. And it had equipped him to be just that, to do just that.

So by this basic experience Moses knew about God and about himself. It had showed him the way to see and to understand himself, it had taught him God. Moses did not forget. He kept to his vocation and firmly held the belief in God's rescuing, loving will.

I you are my employer, please remember why you summoned me and what you sent me do to. Don't forget all you have promised to do. Don't forget: you are God and your reputation is at stake, in front of all the nations around.

And – something I noticed with a mixture of surprise and horror: In God's words there is a dangerous temptation. I am going to destroy them. Then I will make you and your descendants into a great nation.

And lead us not into temptation? He does, doesn't he?

In his outstanding study on Christian Community (Gemeinsames Leben) Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the inclination to excuse myself, to save my good reputation by blaming my sisters, my brothers for my own faults. Something which is quite common in general, but a terrible and impossible behaviour within the Christian Community. It surely will destroy it. As an example, Bonhoeffer quotes Moses' brother Aaron, who is going to excuse himself for the scandal of the Golden Bull: "You know how determined these people are to do evil" (ch. 33, 22). So the priest Aaron turns out to be an accuser, an accuser of his own brothers and sisters, his people.

Be it God's voice or Moses' own desire arising out of his depths – Moses is standing firm in this terrible temptation. You, God, and I, Moses, we shall not proceed from this very place without the people which is and shall remain my people, which is and shall remain your people. God, by your holy name, remember who you are!

Some weeks ago in the convent of Marienwerder we proudly presented lithographies by Marc Chagall, last century's great interpreter of the bible. There were 24 lithographies dealing with the story of the Exodus. One of them touched me especially. Moses, a tall, upright figure, his hands raised as if in despair, helpless. At his feet, more than a shattered wineglass: the shattered tablets of the covenant. The very moment in which a full reset could be possible: Delete and restart. A moment in which

Moses does not know what to do, a moment in which everything has gone to pieces.

But there is something more in this lithography. Something Moses does not yet look at, but something the Jew Marc Chagall precisely knew that Moses must have been aware of. Something which must have been present in Moses, although not consciously in the moment of horror, despair and grief. There are moments when we no more know anything about God, unable to reconsider how he had revealed himself to us.

This something in the air I call the angel of mercy. Or – as not only with Marc Chagall - the angel usually represents the Lord Almighty – God in his mercy. There is an angel flying above Moses and the people, flying above Mount Sinai, holding a Torah scroll in his arms just as we hold a baby in our arms. And there is only one way of interpreting this angel with the Torah scroll: God is present, even in this moment, when the covenant is broken, its document shattered, God is present and ready to renew the covenant in his mercy. The Torah the angel is bringing – God is always bringing – is something which cannot be shattered by believers and unbelievers whatever they are doing. It is not possible for woman and man to change God. It is only possible for God to change to himself from wrath to love and thus to maintain all rights in heaven and earth.

So Chagall in this lithography simply and deeply expresses God's mercy and drew incomparably beautiful the experience Moses had made standing and then kneeling at the burning bush. Only Moses?

A bit later, in ch. 33, it sounds like a conclusion: The Lord would speak with Moses face to face, just as a man speaks with a friend.

We are invited to do so, to communicate with the merciful God as with a friend.

We are invited to share Moses' experience of God.

We are invited to share Jesus' experience of God – he called God Father, even Daddy – Abba.

We are invited by the Holy Spirit to evoke God's mercy in favour of people and nations, tribes and races, rich and poor, and the separated churches. Certainly prayer is a means of healing. Prayer mobilizes the Spirit to act – and ourselves, too.