

*SERMON AT HANOVER INTERNATIONAL WORSHIP,
20 MARCH 2011, DREA FRÖCHTLING,
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WYSIWYG. “What you see is what you get!”

In the good old days of computing, the early to late eighties, WYSIWYG indicated that what you currently see on the screen is what you can also expect on the print-out. Virtual reality made palpable and ready to grasp. A portrayal of the compatibility between desktop-reality and life.

Yet, often, the link between the act of seeing and what is seen is less closely knit and even less evident.

A rather ancient but still popular children’s game, In German entitled ‘Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst’, in English ‘I spy with my little eye’, clearly indicates that the ways in which we see and perceive things do differ. One person chooses an item and discloses the predominant colour of that very item. All the others, one by one, start guessing what it is that is seen by the initiator of the game. Rules and regulations have it that the item needs to be something that can actually be seen by everybody in the room, depending on the perspective they chose.

It was quite fun when you managed to quickly guess what the item under consideration was. And it was decidedly less fun when the game went on and on, with no one being the wiser what it was that had caught the attention of the initiator of the game. Perspectives and perceptions do differ.

When I was a child, my teachers used to claim that I was an obedient, docile and quiet person, patient as well, for that matter. And yet there was one occasion when I flew off the handle – and that was when playing this very game. A friend of mine had, when initiating the game, chosen to concentrate on my glasses – and not for love or money was I able to guess what was meant. I simply did not see that sort of thing. I would have needed a total change of perspective, a different lens to look at myself.

The text for today’s sermon that was just read deals with the issue of seeing, and it deals with a different lens, a change in perspective. In a first part, Jesus kind of foresees his future suffering – a suffering that, despite of several reminders by Jesus, his disciples have lost sight of. And in the second, more popular, part of the passage, the eyes are opened to a previously blind person. Thought of in terms of colour coding of ‘I spy with my little eye’, the rather gloomy picture of the first part is modulated into the much brighter, friendlier picture that the second part of the passage provides. At the

beginning of the passage: the cross. At the end of it: Faith. Cross – faith, faith – cross, a dialectic and paradoxical relationship - and an existential one, for that matter.

Seeing reason in the face of suffering is an incredibly tough intellectual exercise. Seeing love in the face of suffering an incredibly tough emotional one. Seeing an ultimately reasonable and loving God at work is the existential dilemma of faith.

“I simply can’t look at all the death and disaster, the moaning and despair, the world falling apart all around me any longer. I need another vision that helps me to focus on something that is beyond my horizon right now but at the same time keeps me going. And I have been wondering, if I ever went looking for him, the God of the Christians would be in all this. There are way too many crosses here right now. And there is no ‘beyond’ in sight; staring at the sky the thing we expect right now is rather a nuclear cloud.”

Haito, a thirty year old Buddhist who has spent numerous sleepless days and nights in trying to dig out survivors of the Japanese earthquake, to comfort, to strengthen, to feed and to dress, Haito in this quote is verbalizing what is in the hearts and minds of many people – in Japan and world-wide. Where is God –

- **in the ruins and ashes of the aftermath of the earthquake, the cities, villages and nuclear plants**
- **- in the ruins and ashes of human life**
- **in the ruins and ashes of creation**
- **in the ruins and ashes of strived for democracy and political participation world-over**
- **in ...**

Where is God?

The quest for God in catastrophes of unimaginable magnitude has its preceding debates. The Great Lisbon earthquake on 1 November 1755, that led to a presumable death toll of about 40.000 in Lisbon and some further 10.000 in the larger region, has largely reduced Leibnizian optimism and his famous notion of ‘all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds’ to absurdity. Voltaire’s ‘Candide, or: All for the best’, published in 1759, is an apt example of that.

And yet again – there is a much deeper level to theodicy than reason-centred enlightenment debates entertain, i.e. the relationship between what is seen and at hand and an ultimate and nevertheless palpable hope and horizon. Seeing and recognizing an ultimately all-loving, omnipotent and omniscient God when facing utter destruction and death is as difficult as it is to relate to the One who promised ,Behold, I make all things new’.

Collective and individual suffering often blocks the view to a different tomorrow, to a vision of life in its fullness. The gloomy shadows of the cross are hard to escape.

Klaus, a German rescue worker on the same team with Haito, a couple of days ago put it the following way:

“If you see the destruction, smell the death, realize the anxieties and hear the cries of the people – then you no longer ask yourself whether there is any ultimate reason behind this. Assuming reason would mean belittling the suffering of so many. I am not much of a church going person, Christmas for me usually does it for the remainder of the year, but these days stories of crucifixion and resurrection do come back to me. There was this glimpse of Easter right at Golgotha. This is what I am longing for, this is what I want to see right here and right now. And sometimes, embarrassing as it might sound, I do find myself on my knees, praying to a God that I hardly know to open our eyes for a glimpse of light at the horizon. And then, you know, then I ask this God that I hardly know to open my eyes as he did with this blind guy in the Bible.”

Change of time. Change of place. The Jericho of biblical times. A dusty road side. A crowd. A blind man. And Jesus.

The blind man, let’s call him Bartimäus as in the gospel according to Mark, the blind man is cowering at the roadside, somewhere in the vicinity of Jericho. His hand is stretched out, waiting for the leftovers of the more fortunate and more affluent passers-by. The road smells of dust, heated up by the scorching sun. The entry road into Jericho is at all times a busy road. But today is exceptional, today is special. The air seems to be rather vibrant with excitement, discussions more vigorous, the approaching clouds larger than usual. Steps and noises, steps and voices.

When a piece of bread touches his outstretched hand, Bartimäus grasps the hand of his benefactor and asks him: “What is this noise and the crowd all about?”

The response is an immediate one, and literally spurs Bartimäus into action: „Jesus of Nazareth is passing by!“

Bartimäus now uses both of his hands to push himself into a semi-upright position. Kneeling in the dust his voice raises over and against the noisy crowd: “Jesus, Son of David, Take pity on me!”

He can feel the crowd closing in on him. Closer, closer and closer. People start talking about him, focus on him,

feel bothered by him. All of a sudden, he is pushed back to the ground, harshly, mercilessly. Once again, Bartimäus scrambles onto his knees, straightens his back, lifts up his head and shouts:

“Son of David, take pity on me!”

Silence...

And then, Bartimäus hears the crowd moving, this time moving aside, making way for something, for someone. Then hands again, but this time helping him to hoist himself up, hands that guide him through the crowd. Then he can sense someone facing him. Jesus.

„What do you want me to do for you?” – “I want to see again”.

The Greek notion used in the text for ‚seeing’ does have a variety of meanings. On the one hand, it can mean ‘to look up to s.o. or s.th.’. Secondly, it can mean to view, to perceive’. And thirdly, it also has the meaning of ‚regaining one’s face’. Bartimäus carries many a names – and maybe also ours. He embodies our longing to view, to perceive, to grasp God when everything we see is destruction, death, failure and a lack of future. He embodies our longing to look up to a God who is there at the horizon, ready to be encountered, ready to intervene

on our behalf, to bless and to protect us. As Psalm 121 says:

“A song of ascents.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
- ² My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
- ³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
- ⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- ⁵ The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
- ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
- ⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and
going
both now and forevermore.”

Longing for a God who is a companion and a guide at

the same time.

And then, seeing as regaining one's face. Here Bartimäus embodies our deep longing for individual recognition, individual attention, individual care – by a God who knows us by our name – over and against an anonymity of suffering. A God facing us with a new perspective on our life – lovingly and open-ended.

Change of place. Change of time. Japan, epicentre of the earthquake, during the course of this week. Klaus in his rescue mission again, remarking:

“I have been in IT for most of my young adult life. WYSIWYG, that was kind of important to me, something you could rely on. A fair display of things. But these days, I can very well do without WYSIWYG. What I'd rather want to get when facing death and destruction and nuclear threat is rather the promise 'What you see is NOT what you will get in the end'. That I could do with.”

What you see is NOT what you will get - this is a kind of alternative creed that biblical scriptures offer. And it is the very creed that opens up a new perspective on life – life resurrected, life intended, life struggled for. Jesus being raised from the dead offers a new sight on the here and now and encourages uprisings in view of the divine

promises.

The God who has been wounded by crucifixion and death is he same who offers, paradoxically, a new perspective and points to the light behind the cross. A light that we might not be able to grasp through our physical eyes but might envisage through the eyes of faith. The eyes of faith, 'Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst' / I am seeing something that you might not see', are wide open in the ongoing paradoxical encounter between what is before our very eyes and the vision of God's kingdom come.

What you see is NOT what you will get.

Amen