

## On wings like an eagle

Three months ago I have been teaching a seminar in Ethiopia. In this seminar women in the *Ethiopian Mekane Yesus Church* (EECMY) were trained in counseling skills. The future perspective is, that these women are serving as counselors in their respective congregations and parishes.

The seminar was a challenge in many respects: the cultural gap between the teaching and the learning situation as well as the gender issue. A main interest of the participants was: How can we stand up and speak for ourselves and how can we manage to stand together and encourage one another?

One day in our seminar we visualised this topic in a short scene: Some participants took the role of a stubborn old donkey that refused to move forward. Others were trying to make this stubborn old donkey move. They talked to the donkey - tenderly and fiercely - and finally even beat him. But the donkey rejected and even kicked those who wanted to command the animal. In this role-play the participants wanted to demonstrate how difficult it is to bring about change in a male dominant, authoritarian and patriarchal society - and church.

Afterwards, when reflecting what we had experienced I suddenly had the idea that it is also me who is that stubborn old donkey. I was rather disturbed. I shared my feelings with one of my Ethiopian friends. He spontaneously responded: "No, Pastor, you are a lion!" This, of course was very nice of him. However, it reminded me on an African saying:

*Every morning a gazelle wakes up and is alarmed: If I do not run faster than all the other gazelles I will be killed by a lion. - Every morning a lion wakes up and is alarmed: If I am not running fast enough I will not catch the gazelle and will stay hungry. - Therefore, If you are a lion or a gazelle: run as fast as possible!*

I already knew that I am no lion. However, after having visited my physiotherapist the other day I also know that I am neither a gazelle - definitely not.

We are living in a world of predatory capitalism and every day many people are running back and forth to successfully compete in their jobs and in society. Each of us is dealing with this challenge in a different way. This reality of daily life includes social, historical, economical and political aspects. And many of us are rising questions: Who am I? Who is in charge of my life? Whom do I trust? What is creating anxiety in me? What puts me down and what encourages me? Where do I feel at home? What is my longing and desire? What do I believe in?

*"L' Shana Haba'ah B' Yerushalayim" - "Next year in Jerusalem!"* . This is a phrase which in Jewish tradition is often sung at the end of the *Passover Seder* or at the end of *Yom Kippur*. It evokes a theme in Jewish culture of a desire to return to a rebuilt Jerusalem as well as it is a reminder of how it feels living in exile. A theme that includes experiences of being alienated from ourselves. Experiences when we lost contact with our inner child. This vulnerable and lovable inner self in each of us with its desire to be recognized and cherished.

Jewish belief posits that - although the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed twice - it will be rebuilt a third time, ushering in the Messianic era and the ingathering of the exiles and finally of all people, independent of nation and race and belief. In the same way the phrase "Next year in Jerusalem!" is a reminder that we, the people of the world need to reconcile in order to truly be in Jerusalem - a city whose name suggests *Shalom we Shale'im* - peace and completeness. Jerusalem - a place and a time when our wounds will be healed and our longing for a meaningful life will be fulfilled.

Are we receptive to this promise? Are we ready to conceive this promise in a way that it is fruit-bearing in our lives? Are we ready to participate in the wholeness and holiness of God Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth? A theme which becomes crucial in times of trouble, anxiety and despair? What is it, that gives us new courage and inspiration to overcome and to start again - in spite of all?

The other day I have been visiting a new exhibition at the *Jewish Museum* in Berlin. The motto of the exhibition is *"Welcome to Jerusalem"*. Who rules Jerusalem? This question, raised over more than two thousand years has become an actual one also in recent days when President Trump stated, that Jerusalem is the capital of the state of Israel. A statement which has been answered on the Jewish side with satisfaction and on the side of the Palestinians with protest, because also the Palestinians claim Jerusalem as a most

holy islamic place and the capital of Palestine - a state not yet founded nor recognized.

I can warmly recommend to visit this most interesting exhibition in Berlin. It shows Jerusalem as a diverse, fascinating and irritating place. It shows, that Jerusalem can only survive when believers of all religions and also non-believers may live here free, safe, respected and equipped with equal rights.

2500 years ago we had a somewhat similar conflict situation in the Near and Middle East like today. Various great powers and local powers were playing their roles and the individual people and the families had to pay the cost - which always has been true. In the late 7th century the *Assyrians* ruled the area and the *Kingdom of Judah* became a client of the Assyrian empire. However, Assyria was overthrown by *Babylon* - a former Assyrian province. Then *Egypt* got involved when seizing control of former Assyrian territory up to the Euphrat river in Syria.

But Babylon counter-attacked and defeated the army of the Pharaoh. As Judah was an ally of Egypt it was obliged to pay tribute to Babylon, the current ruler. After some years Judah revolted against Babylon and refused to pay tribute. However, Jerusalem was conquered soon again by the Babylonians. The city and the temple were destroyed by the Babylonians and many of the most important people were taken to Babylon.

Fifty years later the *Persians* captured Babylon and the excited Judeans were permitted to return to Judah where they were supposed to rebuild the city and the temple. However, quite many Judeans already had put roots in exile. They were assimilated and lead a rather secure and comfortable life away from home. Those Judeans were no longer interested in going back to their home country. They had taken roots in a country and a culture - including religion - that had become home-country to them.

Many refugees who are living among us and even many citizens who are living in our country in second or third generation have difficulties to tell what their national identity is. Not only on paper, but the identity that is felt in our selves. Am I Turkish or am I German? Am I both? And in what way? Is it a mixed identity or do I have to give up and decide for one? However, isn't it true that each of us at times is being confronted with this question: Who am I? What is my image: how do others regard me? And how do I regard myself? How do I deal with what is strange and disturbing in my own person?

Jerusalem - in Jewish as well as in Christian understanding - is not a mere geographical place. Rather than a metaphorical expression that stands for our longing to at last come home and be the person we are. For our longing to finally be loved and sheltered - in spite of all. For our desire to belong to. To be part of an "entirely whole". And never be separated, confused and lost again.

Obviously many Jewish exiles in Babylon had kept their desire to return to this very place. To restore their houses. But even more to restore the temple in Jerusalem. No better place to experience peace and shelter and love - now and for ever.

This is the moment when the prophet Jesaja spoke to his people:

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand...!*

How wonderful are these words! Isaiah is addressed to a discouraged and worn-down Israelites in exile. Many may have wondered if their God, Jahwe has been disproved? Has it become evident that *Marduk*, the god of Babylon is stronger than Jahwe? Else how had Babylon been able to defeat Judah?. The might of Babylon had left Jerusalem in ruins, with her walls demolished and the temple leveled.

The religious leaders and prophets had tried to keep faith alive in the many years of exiles by arguing that their defeat by Babylon did not disprove the LORD, but rather the reverse: It was not the Babylonian god *Marduk* who defeated the Israelites but rather the LORD himself. The LORD had done it because of Judah's sins. This, of course is a re-interpretation of an apparent defeat. Indeed, it is an expression of belief: The LORD remains being the Almighty God, the one ruler of heaven and earth. And even the mighty enemies of Israel are nothing but instruments in the hand of the LORD.

At this point one may choose to react with excitement - or with depression. Do we trust that God Almighty will show his grace and mercy even to us when we are in trouble? Or do we question if God is a merciful and loving God when leading us into despair? Isn't it unfair and unjust to be left alone in misery? How can we overbridge the discrepancy between the loving God and the God who is leaving us alone when we are badly in need of his presence and help?

To be honest: I believe that this question has to be left unanswered. There is a shadow falling upon our picture of an almighty and merciful God. The truth is that there is a side of God hidden to us. A side of God which we do not and cannot understand. Why that? Because we are not God. Rather than God's creation. Nothing less and nothing more!

Isaiah reminds his people on God the Almighty:

*It is he who sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. (verse 22)*

Compared to their creator, also the mighty, wealthy and influential people are regarded as grasshoppers. In the same chapter Isaiah is comparing the nations of this earth to a drop of water:

*Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket., they are regarded as dust on the scales... .. (verse 15)*

Isaiah uses a rhetorical strategy to convince his people to trust in the LORD. Compared to the LORD Babylon is next to nothing, a mere drop in a bucket and a dust on a scale. This is Isaiah's first point: Israel's God is a majestic God. He is the creator of heaven and earth. Not only can the LORD rescue the captives, but he means to do so because he cares about them. He means to renew their strength.

We know those situations in life when we are exhausted. Sometimes even exhausted to death. When we are not only tired of all these things that again and again drive us mad or sad. Rather than exhausted. Without energy. Without joy. Without hope that things will change to the better.

I am reading Isaiah 40, vers 29:

*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.*

Indeed, these are words of a strong belief. Are we strong believers? And if not, can we anyhow hear these words as words of encouragement? The other day I visited a woman whom I know since long. She is old age now. Almost 85 years. She has always been active and enthusiastic. She occupied honorary posts as an elder in her congregation, and she has been working with homeless people and refugees. She was always been interested in visiting concerts and she liked to have a controversy dispute with others on political issues. However, when I visited her this time she was rather depressed. Because of her bad health situation she no longer is able to cope with every day life. Instead she is forced to sell her house soon and live in a home for elderly people where she receives the necessary support. She cried when she shared this future perspective with me.

When I said Goodbye, she said: Thank you for not cheering me up. My friends cannot tolerate my physical and mental condition as it is now. But you just listened to me. And I had the feeling, that you are taking me seriously. You are not telling me "alternative news" about my situation. This is what comforts me - in spite of all. I am aware of the reality as it is. But I am not hopeless. Instead, I feel my energy and I will keep moving on.

I am reading Isaiah 40, verse 30:

*Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will walk and not be faint.*

To soar on wings like eagles: This is a metaphorical expression for hovering high up in the sky. Lighthearted and carefree. Majestic and free. With an apprehension that, beyond all skies, we are close to heaven. We are finally at home. United with the one and forever almighty and merciful God, who once created us in his image and who never fails loving us from the very beginning to the end - and beyond.

I am coming back to the beginning of this sermon when I raised the question: Who am I? *Who am I* - is the title of a poem that *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* wrote in prison and not far from death.

*Who am I?  
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?  
They mock me these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am. Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!*

