

Sermon Hannover International Worship, 15 July 2018, Luke 4:14ff.

Rome, February 2018. St. Peter's Square is packed to capacity with people. In the midst of the square large groups of pilgrims, most of them clad in traditional regional attires. An air of expectation, of vibrancy surrounds the groups. At the margins, underneath the colonnades and in the adjoining streets, thousands of people on the move, mostly originating from African countries, clad in whatever was left to be used for protection, an air of despondency and despair surrounding them. A journalist from one of Rome's largest daily newspapers bobs up amidst the crowd, interviewing people in the midst of the square and underneath the colonnades, asking what it is that people are looking for in that very place. I still have time before an appointment and, given the curious person I am, I decide to tail after the journalist. After a couple of minutes, clear pattern in responses are emerging. The classical pilgrims in the midst of the square are mostly looking for eternal life and the reassurance thereof. The people on the move underneath the colonnades for enough to eat to make it through the day.

Giovanni, my appointment, has settled with a couple of friends right at the entrance to St. Peter's Square. Giovanni comes from a low-income fishing family and used to be involved in subsistence fishing. Now, since a couple of years, he and a group of likeminded fishermen and women are fishing for people. In their tiny wooden fisher boats they have, so far, saved about 580 lives off the shores of the Italian coast. They call themselves 'Discipleship group Luke 4', and all of them carry a tiny, laminated card with Luke 4, verses 18 and 19 on it:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

They prefer to operate underneath the radar of official refugee support initiatives and underneath the radar of the Italian government to be more flexible in their interventions and to help where no official help is offered.

In a handwritten flyer that they are now distributing to pilgrim groups and tourists entering the area, they explain why they see discipleship in line of Luke 4 intrinsically related to refugee support. Next to the statement "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor", you find brief testimonies that they got from refugees, sharing what poverty meant in their daily lives. And next to the statement "to set the oppressed free", refugees shared brief stories about gross human rights violations they suffered from in their countries of origin. The flyer ends with an open invitation:

“The time for discipleship has come. Stand up for a Europe that actually lives up to the Christian values it so loves to proclaim.”

Change of place.

Johannesburg, South Africa, CBD, September 2017. Streets and squares are jam-packed with people, taxis, roll-ups, flags and banners. The air is filled with voices who feel that they have not been heard by politicians; people struggling in poverty, unions shouting out against state capture, landless people, unemployed people surviving on street-corner economies, women raising their voices for gender justice in Soweto and Alexandra, religious groups in their various attires, lighting candles and getting engaged in power prayer for peace and prosperity for the nation. Another day of mass action.

While I am waiting for two friends of mine to arrive, an elderly man puts down his canvas bag next to me and takes out a large banner. “Can you hold this end for me for a second, sis?” I grab the end of a large roll that he hands to me. 5 meters times 1 of red fabric, with a black inscription saying ‘Allah fights for peace and social justice – let us join the fight’. Abdullah, as he introduced himself to me, and I start talking.

As it turns out, Abdullah is also waiting for two friends. About half an hour later both of them arrive. Ibrahim, an 85 year old rabbi born in Germany who had found refuge in South Africa in the early 1940th and Xolile, a 26 year old pastor of a Pentecostal church. Ibrahim unpacks his banner – ‘Adonaj needs you and me to mend the world’, Xolile hers – ‘Jesus says: I have come so that all have the fullness of life’. A somewhat Trinitarian statement of concern, of religious-based commitment to justice. In addition, all three of them were wearing printed T-Shirts with justice related verses from their respective faith traditions. Xolile’s shirt is sporting “Proclaim good news to the poor. Proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. Set the oppressed free. Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The three of them got to know each other at one of the social justice rallies in Jo’burg a couple of years ago. They consider themselves as kind of lone wolves in an institutional religious setting that is decidedly less concerned about justice issues as they are. There are quite a number of points on which the three friends disagreed: equal opportunity or equal outcome as principle for social justice? Decent wages and affirmative action or basic income grant? Land restitution at a market-based compensation or expropriation without compensation? But what they agreed on was that a people-first approach was needed, that social policies should be informed by the plight of the impoverished and that for way too long politics has been more of a talk-show than a work-shop.

“Ok, guys, action phase.” Abdullah takes out a small set of needles and a bundle of threads from the outer pocket of his canvas bag. “Want one?” He puts a needle and a black thread into my hand. Abdullah, Xolile and Ibrahim turn around to the pavement next to where they stood. A group of five people, currently living on the street from whatever passer-byes put into their tins placed in front of them, leant against the wall of the building behind them. Some food remnants were shared between them, their belongings were packaged in large plastic zipper bags, the clothing they wore frayed and partly tattered. Abdullah, Xolile and Ibrahim knelt down and each approached one person, asking whether they might be of assistance to them. Upon approval they took out the threads and needles and started mending the clothes of that person.

Hours and many mended clothes later we sat down to share a bucket of drum sticks. Ibrahim explained: “When we did it first, this mending, I mean, we thought it was the right thing to do: seeing a person in need, respecting that person, acting in support. But also right from the beginning, we had our doubts. Is it not window dressing to just support one person while many, many others would need support as well? Is it not window dressing to focus on the individual instead of networking for advocacy and change? Somehow we then thought that the one needs the other: If you only do advocacy and make a strategic noise at parliament and you are no longer attached to the dreams, fears and hopes of those who struggle most, then you kind of lose it. And if you only focus on the suffering person right in front of you often you get guilty because you get into individual charity where you would need to rock the whole boat and get more justice into structures and social policies.”

Giovanni and his friends, Abdullah, Xolile and Ibrahim took the transformative potential and the transformative task of religion as a given, and justice and peace as its core. They applied passages from the respective Holy Scriptures in a way that they could become pathways to further justice and peace in form of committed discipleship or emulation. Their applied hermeneutics were that of immediacy, their faith a faith that took its inspiration for engagement on a horizontal level from the vertical relationship with God.

Mending the world by becoming co-workers in God’s creation was a logical consequence for all of them, on an individual as well as on a structural level – across the usual religious divide. As Ibrahim remarked: “So together we need to get our acts together: You need to be the needle that serves the immediate need of your neighbour but you also need to be the needle or the thorn in the flesh of politics. That’s when mending the world starts. And I am sure Allah, Adonaj and Jesus would say Amen to that.”

In some orthodox traditions, the 'Amen' at the closure of a service serves at the same time as the opener to a 'liturgy after the liturgy', with faith getting practical outside of the confines of a Sunday gathering, outside of the confines of a religiously often secluded space. Living out discipleship of the One who asserted: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" requires a liturgy after the liturgy. And it requires responding to *kairos*, a deeply embedded sense of urgency.

I would consider the current situation of refugees in the various stages of their journeys a *kairos* that calls for action – on individual as much as on structural levels. At a time when basic rights of refugees are grossly violated, when lives in the Mediterranean Sea do not seem to matter any longer, when rightwing populism is rampant it might be *kairos* to be a thorn or a needle in the flesh where populism and political decision making endanger the lives of many. And it might be *kairos* to take up a needle and mend what is within our own individual range to mend.

May God who promised justice, life and peace to all accompany us on this journey.

Amen.

[distribution of sewing needles to the congregation]

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